LOGICS OF ATTENTION:

WATCHING AND NOT-WATCHING FILM AND TELEVISION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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Acknowledgements

This is a project about the ways people understand how they pay attention or not pay attention to media in their daily lives. I was especially interested in the many fleeting and half-forgotten things that we do as we watch—the things that constantly happen around us that threaten to disrupt or lead us away from our watching. Writing this dissertation has been its own exercise in managed attention. As anyone who has sat down to cobble together thoughts on a page can attest, writing is a process of countless distractions, diversions, disruptions—some external, many others self-imposed—but almost all of which tend to be smoothed over or ignored when reading the final product. That this project is completed in its present form owes its fact to the colleagues, friends, and loved ones who helped me through the process and ensured that the many diversions encountered along the way indeed remained only fleeting hiccups.

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Dan Hassoun

LOGICS OF ATTENTION: WATCHING AND NOT-WATCHING FILM AND TELEVISION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

This study draws from a series of qualitative interviews and take-home diaries conducted with groups of home film and television audiences to examine everyday practices of media attention and distraction. Often taken as clear and separate experiential states, attentiveness and distractedness are actually social categories with leaky boundaries and definitions. Together, they suggest logics from which audiences draw when they justify combining or not combining movies and television with other aspects of their daily routines (including mobile phone use, cooking, sleeping, working, and so on). Interviewing groups of cinephiles, television binge-watchers, and parents of small children, I detail how people try to attend and *not* attend to aspects of media texts in order to see themselves as "attentive" or "distracted" in particular contexts. I argue that these practices reveal some of the boundary work of everyday life itself—as a domain of accidents and unpredictability, as a sense of certainty and stability, as a series of managed time and work/leisure boundaries, and as a site for suspicion toward media influences.

Within cinema and media studies, arguments about screen attention and distraction have been central to claims about medium specificity, genre and textuality, fandom, screen influence, and the organization of home life. By focusing on everyday knowledges about media engagement, my study both augments and complicates these assumptions about what it means to "watch" a media text, reflecting the (at once) anxiety, pleasure, impulsiveness, and indifference in how people may treat watching as a part of life to manage or cultivate. Ultimately, attending to issues of attention suggests the ongoing interrelationships involved in negotiating screenic versus non-screenic areas of life.

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Introduction

A single mother of a seven-year-old child, Selena talked to me about her ambivalent feelings regarding how her daughter watched films and television programs at home. Selena looked forward to her daughter learning how to become more attentive and "immersed" in the screens she engaged as she grew older. For her, it was good that, as someone aged, they often learn to minimize distractions and attend to texts more deliberately. However, Selena was also suspicious of the possibility of becoming *too* attentive to these screen texts, and she was hesitant about the idea of carving out spaces within her home where viewing could be relatively uninterrupted.

> **Dan:** As she grows up, in ten years or so, what would you like her screen watching to look like?
>
> **Selena:** I'd like her to watch better quality stuff. Better screens, etcetera…Because it would be more immersive and attentive and maybe that would give her the experience of being there in some virtual reality. The experience would be richer on the whole, and that's what I'm interested in for her. I want her to be engaged.
>
> **Dan:** If you had the option of a more immersive home theater system right now, would you pursue it?
>
> **Selena:** No.
>
> **Dan:** Why not?
>
> **Selena:** It just freaks me out, maybe. I feel like that kind of room or space, or taking up the kind of space in your home is just *calling* to you or something. The idea that there's a place reserved for this thing that's so important. It must call your attention all the time. Even if you weren't doing it, you'd be having to ask yourself to not want to stop and watch all the time.

Selena's hesitation toward creating a more attentive home watching environment even extended to some of her favorite films. She looked forward to the future when she could potentially introduce her daughter to *Whale Rider* (dir. Nike Caro, 2002), a movie she loved and saw as holding an important feminist message. Nonetheless, Selena said that if she found her daughter not paying attention to a first-time screening of *Whale Rider*, she "wouldn't tell her to pay more

attention to the movie because I don't want her to have an unnatural relationship to the TV." For Selena, the desire to cultivate attentive watching habits with the television ran simultaneously with anxieties about the relationship of TV attention to other demands of daily life.

Attention and distraction, as it turns out, are particularly difficult things to cultivate and manage, inseparable as they are from questions of what it means to place processes of watching within the flows and routines of the everyday. To paraphrase the philosopher Paul North (2012, 176), media attentiveness "is not one thing" and "its iterations vary considerably," depending on how screens are prioritized as points of focus relative to other activities and objects around them. In Selena's case, attention could refer to a perceptual investment within the screen—an immersion that demarcated deserving films or TV shows from the rest of everyday life. At the same time, screen attention could be a "distraction"—an excessive or troubling misdirection of focus toward a medium over "real life" or responsibilities outside it. These ideas emerged in Selena's conflicting feelings toward home theater systems or her child watching *Whale Rider*: even as she wished that she could separate the screen from the rest of everyday life, she also felt it was important for elements of that life to potentially "stop" her or her daughter from becoming over-involved in watching.

This dissertation examines these ordinary and blurry rules about appropriate media attention allocation. These rules—or logics of attention—arise in moments when audiences justify combining or not combining film and television watching with other aspects of their everyday lives, thus defining the borderlines between acceptable and unacceptable forms of media practice. In this way, logics of attention resemble concepts of "boundary work" described within the field of sociology. As Christena Nipper-Eng (2010, 10) explains, boundary work refers to the ongoing "strategies, principles, and practices we use to create, maintain, and modify

cultural categories." Boundary-setting works to normalize particular ways of seeing and organizing the social world—delineating when someone is "in" one realm of experience versus another—often drawing from laws, pressures, and objects of the world around us which constrain our choices (11). These modes of organization are never fully resolved or achieved, but rather depend on continual reiteration and re-doing; practically speaking, they become an ongoing problem or ambiguity we work through (Parkins and Craig 2006, 140; Thornton 2011, 85). Treating attention as a logic—as a form of boundary work rather than simply a state—allows us to see that individuals are never clearly "attentive" or "distracted"; rather, attention is a social process that people must *do* on a moment-by-moment basis, drawing distinctions between attentiveness and distractedness that often change. This project examines what these distinctions mean for how audiences understand the roles of screens in daily life. What kinds of separations between media and non-media activity do people make when they claim they are being attentive? When do these separations cross over into distractions? What types of screen content do audiences feel demand their attention at certain times, and why? How do they attempt to combine or restrict other activities while film or TV content is playing? And what, ultimately, do these practices suggest about the ordinary interactions between screenic and non-screenic life?

Focusing on logics of attention can reveal some fundamental, and too-often overlooked, details in how media spectatorship is "done" as an ongoing, processual activity (Morley 1992, 133). What we commonly refer to as "watching" is in fact a "thoroughly relational term" (Highmore 2011, 2), deeply intermeshed with other social, material, sensorial, and ecological dimensions of everyday life. As Hermann Bausinger (1984, 349) notes, "media are not used completely, nor with full concentration." People do not simply watch; instead, they watch while talking, texting, doing chores, eating, writing, checking the time, blinking, dozing off, petting

their cat, shuffling in their seats, glancing out the window, daydreaming, stressing out, monitoring the activities of others, speculating how others may be monitoring them, and an infinite list of other things. All of these practices help to texture the environments in which screens are watched and are themselves informed by (though never totally determined by) forces such as work/play divisions, taste hierarchies, social codes, and norms of self-practice. By considering these various forces and their interrelationships with each other, we can approach questions of why and to what extent media entertainment are separated from or integrated within other flows of the everyday.

This dissertation explores how the negotiation of this incomplete and piecemeal concentration carries a normative and moral dimension: the ways that we justify which aspects of screen life we notice and which we disregard or fail to register reveal quite a lot about what domains of experience we feel should be foregrounded or backgrounded (Epstein 2016, 66). Discussions of attention or distraction offer a case study for analyzing how people attempt to put idealized (and inconsistent) models of media engagement into practice. Specifically, the ways that different people place value on particular modes of attention at certain times suggest the shifting ways that they try to define themselves *as* audiences relative to the other roles and demands they must fulfill in their daily lives. Screen consumption is a process of weighing how attentively one should be watching something, and how (or whether) to combine media attention with other activities, habits, and perceptions. In managing these combinations, audiences navigate tightrope acts without consistent rules—between paying too much attention to the screen or not paying attention enough. Watching, as it turns out, involves an incredible amount of accumulated boundary work.

At the same time, this attentional boundary work is often taken-for-granted and

unremarkable, and in this way, logics of attention present one way of approaching the contradictions of everyday life itself. I draw substantially from everyday life studies as it has developed as a subfield of critical theory and cultural studies. Specifically, I begin from one of the key insights of this work—that everyday life is both obvious and elusive. It is a concept notoriously difficult to define or grasp even as it is frequently invoked—something that is "signified everywhere," yet seems to collapse as soon as one tries to apprehend it (Lefebvre 1984, 117; see also Smith 1987, 87). There is general agreement that the everyday encompasses elements of the empirical and experiential rather than the abstract or theoretical; as Andrew Epstein (2016, 4) writes, interest in it is often animated by a "craving for closer contact with the most taken-for-granted and familiar aspects of the quotidian, a desire for greater knowledge and thorough documentation of our own daily lives." Yet, there is notable disagreement over the expansiveness of the term: does it refer to *everything* in the social world or only to particular practices or moods? (Felski 1999/2000, 15). There is also debate about how to see its origins: is it a generalizable part of humans trying to make a stable life in *any* circumstance, or is it a *specific* effect of living under certain conditions of capitalism? (Lefebvre 1984, 38).

For this project, I draw from Rita Felski's (1999/2000) critique of the foundations of many of these debates around everyday life. Rather than finding a specific structural origin for the term (which she argues is too-often a masculine-coded project of seeing dailiness as a barrier to overcome or escape), Felski instead finds value in grappling with everydayness on its own experiential terms. In a phenomenological sense, the everyday manifests as that which seems self-evident—something that "simply *is*" (27). In this way, Felski argues for everyday life as primarily an attitude that can potentially become affixed to any practice as it grows more unremarkable or expected: "Habits are often carried out in an automatic, distracted, or

involuntary manner…Our bodies go through the motions while our minds are elsewhere." At the same time, this sense of unremarkableness is still something that must be continually done and redone, and herein lies the central tension in this term that I wish to explore. Even as the everyday signifies a kind of routinized automation, it is also open to constant interruptions and contingencies: the minor annoyance; the thing you weren't quite expecting; the exception to the rule you decide to make on the fly. *Everyday life is at once something you master and something you feel you are never fully in control of*, and in either case, it is still mundane, utterly ordinary. Rather than a series of ongoing routines, it might be more accurate to describe everyday life as a series of ongoing *attempted* routines (Hassoun and Gilmore 2017, 103).

This dissertation treats film and television attention/distraction practices as attempted routines in this vein. As something usually contrasted with notions of engagement, cultivation, appropriateness, and/or attachment, distraction often signifies all the "other thans" of media life (in other words, the accidental, the disregarded, the stigmatized, or the unwanted results that occur when people try to manage screens in different contexts). By attending to the messiness of these processes, I aim to carve out a way of writing about attention that acknowledges its stabilizing role in the conduct of media and the formation of watching identities, while still being attuned to the many ways it destabilizes and complicates these identities. In doing so, I aim to follow Lawrence Grossberg's (2010, 241) call to embrace "the complexity, contradiction, and contingency of the world" that can sometimes be lost when experience is reduced to tidy concepts. As Janet Staiger (2000, 24) argues, audiences are fundamentally "perverse," and no scholar can lay claim to any singularly "real" account of their behaviors—or, at least, not one that necessarily has clear ideological coherence. (Notably, Staiger explains how this does *not* mean different modes of reception lack ideological implications, just that we may never "sort

this problem out" fully).

Rather than defining attention transcendentally or essentially—or linking it too neatly to any single argument about cultural politics—I am more interested in untangling some of the ways that people attempt to signify "attentiveness," to make attention "mean." This is a particularly difficult knot to untangle, since, as I will show, attention and distraction have come to signify a great many different things. As Ben Highmore (2011, 118) suggests, it is "precisely this quality of unresolved contradiction" that allows the terms to be productive. The words hold a "latent explanatory energy" (Acland 2011, 27–29): their meanings are unstable and their basic principles are not agreed upon, but in their multiplicity, they are able to be both obvious and controversial in turn. It is crucial to illuminate some of these meanings to situate my own study.

Defining Attention/Distraction in the Everyday

In treating attention/distraction as a set of multiple logics, I am indebted to the interdisciplinary humanities critiques of scientific approaches to attention that Kenneth Rogers (2014, 4) has broadly grouped under the term "critical attention studies." This work, drawing from various currents of critical theory, asks how historical developments in Western modernity, industrialism and post-industrialism, and technological acceleration have changed ideas about human attention, perception, and sensation (Beller 2006; Benjamin 1968; Hassan 2012; Kracauer 1995; Löffler 2013; Simmel 2002; Stiegler 2010; Wise 2012). I am most influenced by the genealogical turn some of this work has taken in the past two decades, drawing largely from the arguments of Jonathan Crary (1989, 1994, 1999) about how attention and distraction have developed as identifiable concepts to be studied and managed since the late nineteenth century. Crary begins from the presumption that attention does not exist in any innately cognitive way, but rather

emerges historically through the accumulation of statements and practices that produce social effects we can then refer to as "attention" (Crary 1999, 23). Under this view, there is no essential or trans-historical thing called "attention," but instead myriad ways of knowing and arguing about what the nature of attention is, what it looks and feels like, and what kinds of social problems it plays a part within (Rogers 2014, 18–19). These discourses help form the boundaries by which attention and distraction "can and must be thought" about (Foucault 1990, 6–7). Indeed, the importability of these terms is clear from the diverse array of applications they have inspired across multiple subfields of philosophy, art history, economics, psychology, and neurology, among others

While I will occasionally engage with writings about attention from these other fields, this dissertation's primary interventions deal with attention/distraction as they have appeared within cinema and media studies. As with many other disciplines, film and media scholarship has frequently drawn upon the terms "attention" or "distraction" in order to make claims about audience experience or medium specificity. For instance, psychoanalytic film criticism invokes images of hyper-attentive viewing to argue how screens ideologically capture or interpellate their spectators (Baudry 1974; Metz 1982). Formalist film scholars draw upon cognitive constructions of attentiveness to argue how viewers understand and mentally piece together narratives. Other subfields of media ecology or medium theory often tether certain permutations of attention to specific media or receptive sites—arguing, for example, that home viewing is more "distracted" or fragmentary than theatrical viewing (Casetti 2009, 2011; Ellis 1992; Giles 1985), or that technologies like television or social media sites foster fundamentally more "distracted" modes of engaging the world than other media (Morse 1990; Pettman 2016). Still other scholars take attention as something to classify based on quality, defining several prototypical modes of

attention that people move between (Ørmen 2016). Across these bodies of work (many of which have little else in common with one another), there is a strong tendency to treat attention/distraction as relatively self-evident categories: people are taken as identifiably "in" one state or another at particular times.

The total scope of applications and uses of attention/distraction terminology within film and media studies is too broad for me to outline here. My aim is not to develop yet another set of definitions to add to an already crowded box of conceptualizations. It is also not my intention to disregard these bodies of work simply for attempting to stabilize particular concepts of attention; after all, concepts are undeniably useful (Grossberg 2014), and the logics they draw upon often do appear in ordinary conversations and colloquial understandings. What I do wish to resist is a suggestion that attention means any *one* thing, or that it necessarily manifests itself in everyday media life in consistent or coherent ways. By focusing on attention/distraction as an ongoing boundary work—by grappling with the instabilities and contradictions that exist in any given application of the words—I hope to tell a better story about the contingencies and boundaries that audiences feel they must manage than many existing analyses of the terms have allowed.

Rather than offering a specific application of attention/distraction to describe particular film and television situations, this dissertation's chapters map what Rebecca Coleman (2018) has called the "multiplicity of the present"—the web of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory discourses about attention at play in any screen encounter. These discourses frame the practice of screen attention in a number of converging ways at any moment: as a factor of time, space, individual cognition, medium, text or genre, taste, habit, or randomness; as a skill to perfect or cultivate, or as something to mitigate, reduce, or avoid; as something you control and as something that controls you. These various elements suggest not only many atomized and

interlocking domains of life (Lefebvre 1984, 86), but also competing modes of valuing and evaluating one thing at the same time; life cannot be described under one dominant system, but rather an "interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another, and cancel each other out on certain points" (Foucault 1990, 25; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 20; Seigworth 2006, 116; Striphas 2009, 185–189). This dissertation may "temporarily isolate this or that element" of certain practices of attention for the purposes of description (Williams 1977, 139), but only toward the goal of accumulating and assembling many critical perspectives that are at work at once (Priyadharshini and Pressland 2018).

In this spirit of approaching the "endlessly examinable" qualities of everyday media life (Phillips 1993, 4), I ground my analysis of attention/distraction in some of the colloquial and informal conversations that surround the concepts. These sorts of non-expert understandings are typically not based in any airtight "expert" or "official" explanations—even as they may sometimes draw from someone's piecemeal familiarity with expert terms or arguments (Burkitt 2004, 215; Caporeal 1986, 225; Martin 2010, 369; Seiter 1999, 58). Rather, these are guiding logics that people refer to at a moment's notice, which may conflict with one another, but which nonetheless appear self-evident and obvious enough in their immediacy to give a powerful sense of legibility to everyday actions. It is the realm of the casual and the prosaic—the "public scripts" of phrases, ideas, and anecdotes from which different communities draw for easy reference about the world (Carey 1989, 28–29; Hoover, Clark, and Alters 2004, 7; Swidler 1986). These are the patchworks of inconsistent knowledges and experiences that allow people to feel they know how something works.

Charles Acland (2011, 31) makes a forceful case for the importance of examining these kinds of everyday interpretive processes within critical film and media studies. Speaking about

his experiences teaching media literacy classes, Acland notes how, particularly in the domain of media and entertainment, everyone is a critic, even if they are not paid or recognized as such.

> Any teacher of media or popular forms can attest to the extraordinary range of understandings that students of any age bring to a classroom…Now, it is unfortunately true that many instructors fail to acknowledge the deep experience and expertise of students, or that many proceed to disabuse their students of internalized knowledge, believing that knowledge to be mistaken or in some way inappropriate. Often students' assortment of expertise will go unrecognized as such, and will be actively debased, with the sincere intention of leading students to a better, more effective, and more socially productive critical framework. I would hazard that the result is at best a bifurcated critical apparatus, such that students learn what mode of critique is appropriate for the classroom, all the while continuing to live through and build upon existing cultural commitments and connoisseurship—becoming highbrows in the classroom, lowbrows in life. At worst, students depart with an all-too-familiar anti-intellectualism after witnessing the chasm between 'true' critical analysis and their own experience. (2011, 32)

Acland notes how the lay knowledges that people accumulate about something like media attention (sometimes in spite of official historical, scientific, or critical discourses on the topic), are ultimately what lend it its potency in daily life. The power of these knowledges is such that people very often continue to draw from them even as they learn more ordained accounts about how something "actually" works. As Marc Goodwin (2010, 71) writes, attention remains a controversial subject not because of the uncertainty of the multiple scientific and moralizing discourses around it, but rather because "of the certainty of 'common sense.'" Indeed, even critical writings on attention often begin with reference to some "intuitive obviousness" of the subject (Citton 2017, 15), suggesting that "everyone already knows" what attention feels like (Arata 2004, 197) or that "wavering attention is an experience common to people everywhere" (Hagner 2003, 683).

Common-sense framings of screen attention as something you do *too much* or *not enough* of exist in relation to (even as they are never fully reducible to) understandings about appropriateness, productivity, and self-control in twenty-first century U.S. media life. Most of

the case studies I discuss in this project only make sense in the context of types of self-management in liberal democracies that see screen attention as something to individually cultivate or control (Burchell 1996). In the film and television examples I will detail such as cinephilia, binge-watching, and parental mediation of TV, the control of attentiveness is often tied up with middle-class valuations of personal responsibility, taste, and connoisseurship—the sense that screen practices should be a domain of life to be perfected (see Klinger 2006). These ties of audiencehood to personal responsibility have a complicated historical lineage. Before proceeding further, I wish to briefly outline two of these lineages, both of which emerge from discourses about audiencehood that took shape in the late nineteenth century. The tension between these two histories—one that treats media attention as something to be learned, the other that sees it as something to be avoided—reveal an interplay in lay knowledges around attention that I will be exploring for the rest of this dissertation.

Attention as Self-Cultivation

Attention is frequently discussed not only as something to be given, but also as something to be learned, a social virtue to be properly trained and nurtured (Hagner 2003, 672–683). As Rogers (2014, 195) notes, arguments about somebody's (in)ability to pay attention often stand in for wider perceived problems about generational conflict or democratic participation—the sense that the ability of large masses of people to sustain attention appropriately to cultural artifacts is essential to the continued maintenance of the social order writ large.[1] Here, attention is one of a

[1] This idea most often arises in discourses that routinely sound alarm about purported declines in the ability or willingness of people (particularly the young) to exercise deep focus or sit still and concentrate on one task at a time without multitasking or disrupting themselves (Rosen 2010, 76; Watkins 2009, 184). Nicholas Carr (2010, 220), for example, asks whether Internet technologies are slowly eroding Western society's capacity for deep thinking and, therefore, for empathy or compassion. This fear is echoed across a number of writers who have regarded diminished attention spans as a challenge to liberal democracies in general (Crawford 2015, 12; Jackson 2008, 13; Urgo 2000) or to the humanities, specifically (Hayles 2007; Marc 1998).

regimen of habits that should be cultivated as part of proper social conduct and good manners.

This particular way of seeing attention as a learned audience skill emerged most clearly during changes to notions of etiquette and performance during the nineteenth century. Most notably, the development of industrial capitalist economies, public educational systems, and new disciplinary fields in sociology shifted discourses on how to assess individual personality, as well as how best to govern and shape public conduct on a mass scale (Grieveson 2008, 5). John Kasson (1990, 82) notes how the senses of independence, consumerism, and mobility that urban spaces conferred upon (White, working-class) people also produced increased fears about anonymity and isolation. One consequence of this was an increased emphasis on the importance of reputation, "what can be deduced from appearances, whatever one's inner merits might be" (30). The art of modern life inside this more ambiguous social space became one of reading the character and status of strangers ("arts of detection"), while at the same time maintaining one's own appearances (92; see also Sennett 1977, 238). These norms exacerbated perceptions of social and class inequality and caused many people to internalize guilt that they were primarily responsible for their own social position as a result of their own choices (Rosenzweig 1983, 103). At the same time, these codes also potentially provided a feeling of stabilization and blueprints for behavior (however contingent or problematic) that made everyday life more legible during a time of drastic social upheaval (Kasson 1990, 7).

Attention held an important place within these emerging reputational codes. Specifically, attentiveness became an important *moral* domain, an ethic of respectability and civility for more educated and upwardly-mobile populations. The rise of mass literacy, the creation of public museums and libraries for the display and study of knowledge, and the professionalization and sacralization of popular arts like theater and music all pushed for the cultivation of "intensive"

modes of silent reading and analysis for processing and "appreciating" texts (Kasson 1990, 38; Levine 1988, 68; Sheringham 2006, 25). Most importantly, it became a display of status and self-control to perfect such attentive intensity in certain circumstances. To paraphrase Raymond Williams, attention emerged as a conspicuous mark of culturedness within everyday life: audiences not only "had it," but they would show you that they "had it" (2002, 93).[2] The ability to demonstrate attention emerged as one technique of the body, an arrangement of habits that someone is expected to imitate as proof of their education and belonging within a certain social milieu (Mauss 1992, 458).

Attentiveness, then, was not a neutral action or technique, but rather one that served to mark one's social status and inclusion within (or exclusion from) particular leisure sites. If attention suggested a regimen of restraint and self-control, distraction (not paying enough attention) became its less-cultivated opposite—an indication of a "poorly conducted life, inadequate education, and ultimately, the rule of irrationality" (Hagner 2003, 679). This involved a fundamental transformation in the practice of spectatorship: whereas colonial-era theatergoing had been marked by noisy rowdiness and rabble-rousing (very often by the upper-classes), the theater of the nineteenth century became more of a site for regulated civility (Butsch 2000). As one 1889 manners guide advised about attendance at stage performances:

> Perfect quiet should be maintained during the performance, and the attention should be fixed on the stage. To whisper or do anything during the entertainment to disturb or distract the attention of others, is rude in the extreme. (quoted in Kassan 1990, 242)

Such practices of theatergoing civility would transfer over to the movie theater by the late 1910s as a means of attracting more "respectable" middle-class audiences (Hennefeld 2016, 28; Kassan

[2] Governmentality scholars have noted how this quality of proper regard toward screens and cultural texts was central in the development of cinema and television as tools for the governance and maintenance of social life. States, corporations, and other institutions have drawn upon moving images (and an assumed common attentiveness to those images) to teach populations patterns of behavior at different points in the development of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism (Greene 2005; Grieveson 2009; Hay and Ouellette 2008; McCarthy 2010).

1990, 255; May 1980, 148; Sennett 1977, 206–207), with working-class audiences at greater risk of physical ejection from the theater if they did not comply (Rosenzweig 2002, 40). Levine (1988, 195) refers to this as a "cult of etiquette," a directive of forward-facing screen immersion that called on spectators to follow the rules, to not attract attention to themselves or their own bodies, and to observe a quiet docility. These codes of civility have had a particularly critical influence on the development of cinephilia: the cementation of cinema as a medium deserving of close attention hinged to a large extent on the education of audiences into more "dignified and controlled" quiet and contemplative behaviors (Wasson 2005, 2), which could then be contrasted against the rowdiness of so-called "normal habits" (Marx 2014, 94).

Attention as Self-Destruction

At the same time that attention was emerging as a mark of self-control, it also acquired more negative connotations of docility, laziness, and passivity. Then as now, perceptions of media consumption often hover between voluntarism and determinism: even as people saw themselves as deliberate consumers of technology, they were also anxious about the capacity of technologies to consume *them* (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992, 2). This anxiety formed a counterpoint to the calls for close, studious attentiveness developed since the nineteenth century: rather than a voluntary extension of will (as discourses of etiquette and cultivation would posit), attention was something that could instead run away from the individual's control, locking them into unhealthy influence by screens they encountered. If focused attention was on the one hand a pro-social tenant of rational, liberal democracy, it could also suggest on the other hand the anti-sociality of

a hypnotized or submissive mass.[3] Rather than centering on how audiences were too rowdy or rude to the screen, fears focused instead on how they are too entranced by the screen (Butsch 2000, 2–4).

This split in meanings reflects a tendency from the nineteenth century onwards to not only treat attention as an outward social action, but also as an inward psychic process (Hagner 2003, 683). Crucially for discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these psychological processes were not necessarily in the individual's control and could often be subject to outside manipulation; selfhood itself was conceived as fundamentally malleable and plastic (Munsterberg 2002, 80). Paradoxically, the very practices of attention that social reformers encouraged as a means for individuals to distinguish themselves from others also had the potential danger of destroying those individuals' abilities to think or act for themselves. Thus, one of the animating concerns of social research became how individuals could continue to exercise their skills of self-control in the wake of the relentless "modern life flow" of external influences threatening to sway or "swallow" them (Simmel 2002, 11).

Cinema and television have been crucial components in these discourses about threats to selfhood. Early film was frequently intertwined with concerns about mass hypnosis—where minds could be "penetrated" and held by negative forces (Acland 2011; Crary 1999, 65–66; Grieveson 2008, 5). Developing from this was a deep ambivalence about people's abilities to control their own media spectatorship: someone's inability to concentrate could be seen as breaking down the social order, but concentrating *too* well opened them up to sheep-like conformity or uncritical susceptibility to propaganda (Turner 2013). Under this view, subjects were attentive, but vulnerable and feeble (Acland 2011, 5); they could be immersed in screens,

[3] This double meaning reflects a fraught contradiction at the heart of the concept of mass culture itself. As Raymond Williams (1983, 195) traced, "massness" can be treated as both the ignorance of mob rule or the pro-sociality of civil society.

but they may be unable to "maintain the specular distance" necessary to avoid being subsumed by their pull (Grieveson 2008, 5). These hypodermic needle imaginings of media consumption took a particularly resonant form in discourses around television, where TV watching stoked middle-class fears about mind alteration or foreign substance ingestion (Hargraves 2015; Mittell 2000). In fact, Butsch (2000, 262) notes how TV lost much of its cultural capital in the 1950s as its viewing became more attached to images of working-class mindlessness or irresponsibility.

"Distraction" emerges as an especially fraught and confusing term in these conversations. Rather than a term suggesting uncivilized or uncontrolled variables from outside the screen that challenged one's attentiveness, distraction could instead indicate an uncontrolled intensity of attention *toward* the screen. Here, one was distracted not because of their inability to attend to media, but because they attended too fervently—and, therefore, too unthinkingly.[4] In a seeming paradox of terms, the subject became "distracted" because they were "too attentive." This idea of the helplessly distracted viewer has taken its most enduringly recognizable form in the figure of the couch potato. The couch potato offered a vision of the home viewer as slumped in their sofa lazily or stupidly drinking in screen images for hours on end with little to no critical reflection—an embodiment of a supposed "civilization in recline" (Kroker and Weinstein 1994, 41). This image of so-called passive leisure was used to differentiate TV from more "active" (male) work activities, especially in Cold War-era discourses where critics feared that physical stillness made the subject more prone to mind control or herd-like mentality (Tichi 1991, 90–110).

[4] It is worth noting how much influence this sense of the word "distraction" has held within critical media studies. This is most prevalent whenever the scholar is attempting to argue against the corruptive effects of modern media on critical thought, democratic participation, and/or revolutionary sensibility. Referring to "distraction" has been useful as a rhetorical device for a surprisingly diverse array of thinkers. Thus, writers like Stuart Ewen (2001, 14) can caution about how advertising distracts and colonizes every moment of human attention; Guy Debord (1995, para. 59) can raise alarm about how subjects are held in their own subjugation to the "glitter of the spectacle's distractions"; Margaret Morse (1990, 193) can claim that television (like freeways and shopping malls) distracts its users from a concrete sense of their immediate reality; and, perhaps most prominently, Neil Postman (2006, 155) can admonish that U.S. culture is becoming "distracted by trivia," amusing itself into a death-spiral where public dialogue becomes indistinguishable from "baby-talk."

Across these two historical trends—one encouraging more deliberate screen attentiveness, another discouraging it—discourses around good attention as a trainable middle-class habit have been split. As I show, these discourses sometimes make a distinction about proper types of attention based on perceptions of screen content or medium (for example, treating movies as a different platform for attention than television). More often, however, these arguments about attention refer to "screens" in a much looser and more generalized sense as things to manage and position within daily life. Here, attempts to construct film or TV as "attentive" (separated from other flows of life) in one context can be, in yet other contexts, construed as "distracted" (detracting the audience from other things they should be doing). As I will show, these tensions developing over the past two centuries continue to be a major structuring logic (sometimes dominant, sometimes residual) for how many audiences understand and justify their film and television practices across various devices and locations.

Method and Construction of the Audience Study

My focus on film and television's integrations within and separations from daily life is heavily influenced by the ethnographic work on "active audiences" within sociology and cultural studies during the 1980s and 1990s (much of which focused on home television practices). This work challenged claims that audience experience could be deduced from looking at the text or medium alone. Instead, scholars used interviews and participant observation methods to locate an empirical audience within everyday relations of class, gender, and nationality, treating reception as a complex negotiation between individuals, institutions, and social structures (Ang 1992, 1996; Bird 2003; Gray 1992; Hobson 1982; Morley 1986, 1992; Radway 1984). This work took the "small-scale" details of routines—including seating arrangements, family members'

authorities over the remote control, talking over programs, and so on—as inroads for discussing the social and cultural relationships circulating inside the home. For the purposes of this dissertation, the key insight of this literature lies in how it *situated* media as but one of many interconnected activities and flows within the home: television was often only an occasional or peripheral interest, and even audiences who engaged it would frequently talk it, leave the room, or combine watching it with other tasks. This understanding of audiencehood has influenced the more recent work of scholars like Anna McCarthy (2001), Acland (2003), and Andrea Kelley (2014), who call for empirically or ethnographically analyzing the "quotidian geography" of how media devices are often-disregarded parts of daily life. Here, media are analyzed based on their uses and intermedial relations with other technologies, sites, and cultural forms (Huhtama 2012, 145; Livingstone 2002, 79).

Following from these bodies of work, this dissertation approaches questions about everyday audience practices by undertaking a qualitative audience study. Where I depart from some of this work is in my interest in the more granular boundary-keeping processes at play when both audiences *and* scholars try to affix labels to certain kinds of practices. Attention and distraction, in particular, are often referenced as a taken for granted binary even within audience scholarship. For example, David Morley (1992, 148–149) describes gendered "styles of viewing" in his home viewing studies, noting that men "state a clear preference for viewing attentively," while women (pulled between other familial and home responsibilities) are more likely to view more distractedly. Morley's goal is to contextualize different watching tendencies as indicative of domestic roles of masculinity or femininity. However, his and his respondents' invocations of "attentive viewing" raise still other questions that could use their own contextualization. For instance: how precisely do these men know they are being attentive?; are there exceptions to this

attentiveness, when they willingly or accidentally interrupt their viewing in more supposedly "feminized" ways?; what prevents their uninterrupted attention from being figured as a pacified distraction? These ambiguities—which draw from their own messy discourses around gender, class, taste, productivity, agency, and daily life, but without clearly or satisfyingly reducible to any of them—are my interest in this study.

In defining my own study, it is important to acknowledge how audiences, like concepts of attention (or "everyday life," for the matter), do not simply exist "out there" as a reality to be gathered up and described (Highmore 2002, 1). Researchers define boundaries around audiencehood that mark particular groups of people and their behaviors as productive and legible for study (Bratich 2005, 260). Although a study of audience attentional logics could potentially engage any number of media technologies or spaces, I am intentionally limiting my focus to *film and television program* watching at home (as opposed to gaming, music or radio listening, web browsing, social media use, and other common forms of media use). Of course, as noted above, movie and TV attention has already been subjected to a deep record of writings within film and media scholarship. This backlog is part of the reason for my interest: by focusing in a more granular fashion on the interplay of discourses at work in any moment of attention, I hope to suggest the extent to which existing literature on the topic has yet to grapple with many fundamental aspects of film and television experience. Given the convergent nature of film and television encounters (where viewing is potentially spread across a wider array of screens and devices than the traditional television set of yore), I did not delimit specific home technologies on which films or television needed to be watched (though I do discuss how people may regard the attentional status of different devices in different ways).

My choice to focus on *home*-based practices is not because I regard the home as an

essentially more "distracted" viewing site relative to other possible environments, as many scholars like John Ellis (1992) have asserted (and which I directly address in Chapter 1). Rather, my interest stems from a recognition of "home" as its own intriguing realm of boundary maintenance. Households are "transactional systems" between public and private worlds, between practices of work, leisure, and consumption, and the lines between home and non-home activities must be continually drawn and redrawn (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 18–19). Media technologies have long played ambivalent roles in these negotiations, at once contributing to or reinforcing domestic routines while also acting as potential threats to them (Mackay 1997, 278; Silverstone 1994, 170; Spigel 1992). The story of attention/distraction has many potential parallels with the boundary work of homemaking: the tendency for someone to see a screen as a point of attention or distraction often has a lot to do with whether they perceive that screen as part of their home routine or a disruption to it. As Felski (1999/2000, 24) notes, homemaking also exists as a common shorthand for understandings of everydayness and ordinariness (even as everyday life as a concept encompasses much more than simply home spaces). In this way, studying logics of home attention becomes one way to approach lay knowledges about the nature of everyday life more broadly, especially as domestic routines become more and more entangled with questions of screen management (D'Heer and Courtois 2016).

I divided my participant recruitment into three groups: cinephiles, television binge-watchers, and parents of children aged five to ten. I selected each of these identity categories based on how they seemed to involve degrees of self-reflexive negotiation about "paying attention" to media for certain lengths of time. This included, but was by no means limited to: attentiveness as a form of appreciation or connoisseurship (discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 4); attentiveness as a signal of *amount* of media watched (discussed in Chapter 3); and attentiveness

as a responsibility to nurture in others (discussed in Chapter 4). I was also interested in each group's varying understandings of concepts of *distraction*: as something arising from outside the screen (discussed in Chapters 1 and 2); as a sign of disapproval or boredom (discussed in Chapter 2); or as a synonym for spending excess time or energy on screen matters (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4).

In my recruitment, I did not define any specific conditions for somebody to be considered a "cinephile" or "binge-watcher"; rather, I allowed each participant to self-identify as belonging to a particular group and then asked them for their own understandings of that group identity during interviews. I chose this route because more formal attempts to define these terms have not always been able to successfully engage with their more colloquial applications. Cinephilia, for instance, is often situated precariously between academic and popular definitions, used formally to refer to "specific intellectual discourses about film," but informally to refer to a broad "love of cinema" (Goodsell 2014, 10; Hudson and Zimmermann 2009, 136).[5] Rather than formulating strict guidelines for inclusion, I was more interested in learning what kinds of informal commonalities arose between participants who generally identified with certain labels. (I explain my recruitment of the parental group in more detail in the introduction to Chapter 4.)

I recruited participants through a combination of flyers and social media promotions around Indiana University (IU) and the Bloomington, Indiana community. For the cinephile group, the IU Cinema (a campus venue for repertory, foreign, and arthouse film screenings) agreed to advertise the study to 5,000+ followers on its official Facebook and Twitter pages. For

[5] Ever since Antoine de Baecque famously referred to cinephilia as "a way of watching films" (quoted in Elsaesser 2005, 28), an enormous amount of work in film studies has been dedicated to defining the contours of the term. Numerous film scholars have argued for cinephilia as associated with particular viewing rituals (Behlil 2005; Casetti 2009) or as a deliberative watching strategy distinct from "average viewings" of a film (Keathley 2006). De Valck and Hagener (2005, 14) probably best articulate my own sense of the term for the purposes of this dissertation when they argue that cinephilia is an "umbrella term" for many kinds of idiosyncratic affective attachments to the moving image.

the binge-watching group, I posted paper flyers across campus on public and departmental bulletin boards. For the parent group, in addition to campus locations, I also placed flyers in the county public library, YMCA bulletin board, and other public community boards located around town. Several participants in each group ended up learning about the study from other respondents, which helped create a small snowball sample.

The promotions instructed interested participants to email me, after which I would reply with more information on the study (including an informed consent form) and instructions on establishing a time to meet for an interview. Initial interviews were approximately forty-five to sixty-minutes long and took the form of a semi-structured conversation. At the end of the interview, I provided instructions for a take-home viewing diary assignment for the participant to complete on their own. The diaries (which varied slightly between each participant group) were digital forms that asked the respondent to type details about how they paid attention to a film or television episode they watched each day over the course of two weeks (Appendices A–C). If the respondent did not watch any movie or program on a particular day, they did not fill out a diary form for that day; if they watched multiple movies or programs in a day, they were instructed to select one to write about. I encouraged participants to complete the diary form within twenty-four hours of the day in question, and also instructed them to try not to change their media routines for the purposes of the diary. At the end of the two weeks, respondents would email their diaries back to me and establish a time for a follow-up interview. These second, final interviews ran between fifteen and thirty minutes. All interviews were conducted in a designated interview room in the Institute for Communication Research on the IU campus. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. All names (including those of children and friends mentioned during interviews) were changed. Each

participant was compensated up to $60, paid in installments for each component of the study they completed ($20 for the initial interview, $30 for the diary, and $10 for the follow-up interview).

I began the first interview by asking for the respondent's general opinions and definitions of terms such as "attention," "distraction," "cinephile," "binge-watcher," and so on. I also asked for details regarding the participant's home environments and typical viewing routines—including technologies used, locations within the home, frequencies of watching, and what other activities tended to occur during their viewings. Following from this, I asked more detailed questions regarding (a) the participant's sense of appropriateness or inappropriateness for certain watching practices, (b) their perceptions of success or failure in paying attention to certain media at certain times, and (c) how they drew boundary lines between being "attentive" and "distracted" in different situations. Since the interviews were semi-structured, people were allowed to give spontaneous accounts of related topics, such as their thoughts on attentiveness in other locations (such as in movie theaters or in public) and with other media technologies (such as books or mobile phones). Throughout interviews, I tried to identify moments of definitional ambiguity where the participant's use of words like "attention" or "distraction" began to blur or become unclear and in those moments, I urged the participant to try to clarify their intended meanings.

My reasons for incorporating a take-home diary assignment were twofold. First, the diaries allowed me to gather additional details and texture for each respondent's media routines. I found this important given that people's stated rules and stories often express their general intentions more than their specific practices (Horst 2010, 178), and the diaries allowed me to find moments where people's recorded actions seemed to bend or break the rules that they stated for themselves in their interviews. Second, given the difficulty of remembering ephemeral or

mundane details about everyday behavior (Evans, Coughlan, and Coughlan 2017, 195; Wilson 2016, 183), the diaries urged participants to think about their own routines in more detail—to try to pay attention to their own attention (North 2012, 48). I was then able to use the second, follow-up interviews as an opportunity to not only clarify what the participant had written in their diary, but also to ask if they would modify anything they had stated in their initial interview.

I ultimately recruited fifty-one participants who completed at least the initial interview (sixteen in the cinephile group, eighteen in the binge-watching group, and seventeen in the parent group). Of these, thirty-seven completed the viewing diaries and returned for follow-up interviews (including twelve in the cinephile group, twelve in the binge-watching group, and thirteen in the parent group). The total pool included twenty-two men and twenty-nine women. The average age among all participants was 27.4 (the average was 24.5 in the cinephile group, 25.8 in the binge-watching group, and 39.7 in the parent group). The racial breakdown was thirty-seven White (72.5 percent), seven Asian (13.7 percent), three Latinx (5.8 percent), one Black (2 percent), one Native American (2 percent), and two mixed race (4 percent). As anticipated for a small college town (and given the locations in which I promoted the study), the participant pool was highly educated: when asked about their highest level of education, two had finished high school (4 percent), two were completing or had earned a two-year associate's degree (4 percent), twenty-six were completing or had earned a four-year bachelor's degree (51 percent), eighteen were completing or had earned a master's degree (35 percent), and three were completing or had earned doctoral degrees (6 percent). In terms of living situations, most respondents cohabitated or lived with others: in the cinephile and binge-watching groups, twenty-seven people lived with at least one partner or roommate versus seven who lived on their own; among the parent group, fourteen lived with a spouse or partner and three were single

parents.

It is important to note that I do not see this project as a neutral report of a particular audience group's media routines, nor was fact-checking the actuality of people's stated routines really my goal. As with any audience study, my work falls within what Klaus Bruhn Jensen (2019) terms the "double hermeneutics of audience research," where audiences interpret their lived realities, which are then reinterpreted by the intervention of the researchers. These layers of hermeneutics, which have dogged attempts to gather information on "real" audience activity since the earliest days of reception research (Ang 1991; Buzzard 2012), certainly were present in the accounts I received and the way I have decided to organize them. It is common for people to try to shape or adapt their responses to "fit" what they perceive a researcher is interested in hearing (Wilson 2016, 183). This can be of particular concern for more well-educated study groups, such as the ones I recruited. As Jonathan Gray (2006, 130) notes, these groups are more likely to "want to over-contribute to the production of knowledge" about themselves, offering more "intellectualized explanations" of practices that they otherwise may have disregarded or ignored in their daily lives. The fact that I paid my participants for their time may have also influenced the types of responses that some felt they should give me (despite my urgings to the contrary). Additionally, as my demographics overview above suggests, my study should not be taken as a random sample or representative of U.S. audience practices writ large; as with most other communications research, my group was largely White, middle-class, able-bodied, college-educated, and young (Warren 2005). Most of my respondents cohabitated or lived with somebody else, which no doubt affected aspects of their routines, such as available viewing locations in the home (for example, watching in a living room versus a bedroom), or their frequencies of co-viewing. Finally, there were likely seasonal variations at play: most of my

interviews were conducted during summer months when many participants were on break from school, and they told me that their frequencies of media consumption tended to change once their semesters began.

Given these various contingencies, I approach my audience responses as a (non-exhaustive) constellation of attempts to assign sense or knowledge to experiences of attention and distraction. By this, I mean that this study is less concerned with specifically *what* things people do in front of their screens or *how* they do them (even as these details are important), and more concerned with *what reasons* people draw upon to justify or describe why they act in particular ways. These reasons, rationalities, justifications, and logics are not always cohesive; they are often applied to actions after they have already occurred rather than necessarily motivating them from the start; they may not even accurately represent the minutiae of how someone behaves. I believe, however, that in their messiness, these logics of attention suggest ways that relationships to screens have been tied to notions of proper, middle-class self-management—as both things to exercise a controlled attachment toward *and* things to detach oneself from (Jenkins 1992b, 60–62). In this way, I aim to give a convincing and recognizable account of one formation of logics for managing film and television in everyday life, while not hiding the inherent contradictions and instabilities that inevitably underlie any such account (Wolf 1992, 129).

Organization of the Study

I have organized the dissertation into four chapters, each centering on one logic that my participant groups used to frame attention or distraction with film and television. Across these logics, two main stories emerge about understandings of media attention and everyday life. In the

first story, told across the first two chapters, attentiveness signals a form of attachment or dedication to a screen, while distractedness means aspects of daily life that intrude upon or draw somebody away from watching. In this story, my interviewees' focus tends to center on how best to mitigate or reduce distractions when trying to pay better attention to a movie or program of interest. In the final two chapters, however, these understandings reverse: distraction becomes synonymous with paying *too much* attention to a screen. Here, the guiding concern is one of reducing one's screen attention outright in favor of other daily activities—or at least finding ways to productively incorporate these activities into one's screen time in order to avoid being too distracted.

Chapter 1, "Viewing Interference and the Disruptions of the Ordinary," considers logics of attention that treat the everyday as an accident-prone or unstable domain where it is impossible to fully control what may happen at any instant. Drawing from sociological and critical cultural perspectives on contingency, I discuss how particular spaces and technologies (such as movie theaters or home cinema systems) have been figured as attentive or distracted based on shifting understandings of how interference and predictability operate. In particular, I examine what I call "the myth of total cinematic concentration," a guiding myth about the necessity for (or even the possibility of) creating and maintaining contexts of complete attentiveness divorced from the rest of daily life. Drawing primarily from my cinephile study group, I detail how my respondents identified different occurrences within their watching environments (such as tech failures, eating, sleeping, mobile phone use, and so on) as disruptions or not in certain circumstances. I argue that many of the descriptions about distracting viewing sites that people tend to blame on particular spaces may actually reveal larger attitudes about instability within ordinary life.

In Chapter 2, "(Dis)Attending the Familiar: Expectation, Boredom, and Rewatching," I explore how respondents in my cinephile and binge-watching groups develop feelings of familiarity and expectation toward the smallest details of the media texts they encounter. Rather than a domain of instability, everyday life here becomes marked by a sense of predictability and repetition. I consider how respondents' attentional practices toward concepts of genre, quality, boredom, and rewatching show how predictability can signal both an attachment to and a disregard of film and television as features of one's daily routine. In order to describe this interplay of attachment and non-attachment, I propose a view of media attention as "bendable"—fluctuating around multiple poles of engagement, half-engagement, and disengagement, often during a single text or with the same text over multiple viewings at different times. I argue that a "bendable" view of attention allows us to discuss how somebody may be both paying close attention to and ignoring a media text at the same time.

With Chapter 3, "Twitching, Switching, and Bingeing: Negotiating Time-Based Distraction," I began considering ways in which respondents attempt to avoid excess attention ("distraction") to film and television. Here, respondents treated everyday life as a domain for perfection and self-management, particularly with regard to managing boundary lines between supposedly productive and non-productive life. Attention is figured as a factor of time in these discussions, where spending too much time with media threatens to mark the watcher as "distracted." I describe states of "twitchy viewing," where respondents express guilt about distracting themselves with screen leisure rather than spending time with other, so-called productive tasks. In order to avoid this sense of unproductive watching, some respondents turn to what I call "switchy viewing" strategies (or multitasking), limiting their sense of distracted watching by combining it with other practices. The conceptions of time and self-practice

suggested by these strategies gesture not only to gendered separations of labor within the home, but also to post-Fordist "flexible" work configurations where workers are expected to manage blurred work/leisure lines. The chapter ends on a case study of television binge-watching, where respondents try to balance notions of unrestrained leisure with strategies against "over-watching."

The fourth and final chapter, "Getting into It: Activity, Passivity, and the Parental Mediation of Attention," focuses exclusively on my interviews with parents. Specifically, I consider how screen attention is discussed as a matter of everyday sociality to perform, cultivate, and detect—particularly in the context of parents' mediatory responsibilities of preparing their children for their futures. Distraction here becomes defined less as a factor of time, and more in terms of excessive absorption or immersion that can be read from bodily posture. I illustrate how parents try to negotiate (a) socializing their kids to watch and engage screens appropriately with (b) anxieties that their kids are watching too intensely and disengaging from more "creative" activities or familial responsibilities. These strategies rely on parallel constructions of attentiveness—where audiences come to perform "attentive watching" as a sign of cultivation, while at the same time being taught to distrust media as sources of external manipulation. Such tensions continue in ambiguities about recognizing active versus passive watching, where parents can be unsure whether being an "active" audience means immersing oneself in a screen text versus physically distracting oneself from its pacifying glare.

In the conclusion, I tie together the different logics of attention throughout each chapter to discuss how they may intermingle and work together in simultaneity within home watching situations. Taken together, these logics of watching and not-watching point to several themes that make everyday media attention such a tricky topic to analyze, much less practice, including the interrelationships among screens and non-screens and the tension between control and escape

in daily routines. This framing of media experience as a multiplicity of forces offers a more vernacular and situated type of analysis than those that try to examine attention or distraction as clear symptoms of a specific historical, cultural, or political reality. As film and television technologies become ever more central to many people's lived routines across different spaces, it becomes increasingly crucial for film and media scholars to consider the multiplication of lay knowledges about attention and distraction, and with them, the desire to both integrate and separate our experiences with these technologies from the rest of life.

Ultimately, it is my goal to demonstrate what a serious consideration of these lay knowledges and everyday boundary-keeping processes on their own terms can offer to film and media studies. Reckoning with the strange and unpredictable place of the audience in everyday life requires a more careful reckoning with the inconsistent, impulsive, and piecemeal ways that people conduct themselves and understand what they do. This is an analysis that does not produce the kinds of definitional clarity or cultural diagnostics preferred by some critical scholarship, but in its own way, it may offer more nuanced ways of accounting for the ways we try to fashion our selves around media each day, hour, minute, and instant.

Chapter 1

Viewing Interference and the Disruptions of the Ordinary

In one of his viewing diary entries, Albert detailed an experience he had watching the 90-minute pilot episode of the television series *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991) on his home desktop computer. Alone in his quiet apartment, Albert reported absolutely no distractions or disruptions to his watching—writing a simple "Nope" to a question on the form asking him to detail any interruptions that arose. I asked him to go into more detail during his follow-up interview.

> **Dan**: For *Twin Peaks*, for the question about whether you encountered any distractions or disruptions, you only wrote 'nope.' Did absolutely nothing happen when you watching it? What did you mean by 'nope?'
>
> **Albert**: It was just quiet in my apartment and I sat and watched it. Nothing bothered me. No one contacted me or messaged me. Never paused. Nothing came up at all. I just watched it and wanted to take some time for myself.
>
> **Dan**: Is this pretty typical when you're watching stuff?
>
> **Albert**: Sort of? I'll just watch things all the time without doing anything else. I guess that day might have been more quiet than usual.
>
> **Dan**: More quiet than usual?
>
> **Albert**: I mean, you know, it's not that weird, it's not weird for *something* to happen.

Probably the most common understanding of "distraction" among my respondents was based on this conception of distraction as interference. Distractions, in other words, functioned as (usually unwanted) factors that emerged to scramble or challenge one's concentration: phone calls, email notifications, pets, rowdy roommates, window glares, tech failures, and so on. It served as a shorthand for many unplanned or unintentional occurrences that siphoned attention away from a screen for some duration of time. In this sense, Albert's story was somewhat unusual among my respondents: his conviction that no distractions occurred was tantamount to claiming that "nothing else happened." At the same time, Albert still gestured toward the possibility of

"something happening" many of the times he would sit down to watch (though he did not elaborate on specifics). "Nothing happening" always carried the possibility of crossing into "something happening," with the uninterrupted maintenance of one's attention hanging in the balance.

What does it mean for "something" to happen, for interferences to emerge? Moreover, why do these interferences occur, how are they made meaningful *as* interferences, and how do audiences attempt (whether concertedly or half-heartedly) to mitigate their likelihood or impact? Exploring these questions raises more than just amusing anecdotes about ruined viewings or accidental interruptions. It forces us to consider a certain semiotic tension in the everyday—namely, how particular experiences are marked as distractive or attentive from moment to moment, as well as how interferences interact with or exist within states we might typically refer to as attentive. The work to control interference around film and television viewings is, in many ways, one subset of attempts to understand stability in everyday life writ large in relation to neverending flows of instances, objects, and impulses (ranging everywhere from screening-destroying commotions to minor annoyances).

This chapter considers logics of attentional practice that treat everyday life as an unpredictable, somewhat random, or unstable domain where it is impossible to fully control what may or may not happen at any instant. This ongoing interference-mitigation may interact with telephonic and digital technologies that open us to communications from people or institutions outside the home, but it is just as bound to other relationships we have to our home viewing locations, the objects, materials, and other living beings that inhabit those locations, and the many biological, mental, and emotional rhythms that affect our ability to hold attention toward certain things at certain times.

I begin this chapter by drawing from both social interactionist and ethnomethodological scholars in sociology and affect scholars in critical cultural studies to account for the always-present possibility of distractions that lurks within and around many accounts of screen attention. Following from this, I critique some work in television and, especially, cinema studies that has tended toward idealized constructions of audience attention as a stable or solid state that people "achieve" or are "held in." This includes recent studies into home theaters that take for granted the idea that dedicated audiences necessarily replicate notions of "theatrical attention" within the home. I argue that if we take seriously the profound contingency at the heart of everyday life, we see that attention "is both multiple and partial, ambiguous and incoherent, permanently in process of being articulated, disarticulated and rearticulated" (Ang 1996, 125). Along this line, I discuss how particular spaces (such as the movie theater or the home) and particular technologies (including home video playback or home theater systems) have been figured as "attentive" or "distracted" based on shifting understandings of how interference and predictability operate. Finally, I discuss how my respondents tried to identify and manage interferences within their own screening experiences. This often entailed positioning their film and television watching in relation to various happenstances of living—sometimes in the form of "outside" factors like noise, light, pets, or phones that could draw away their attention, but also "internal" contingencies like stressfulness and sleepiness that could affect their abilities to concentrate even in supposedly "ideal" circumstances. Ultimately, I argue that the way we define and respond to interferences in our media watching experiences suggests our larger attitudes toward the ambiguities and instabilities of ordinary life beyond clear space- or medium-specific considerations—as frustrations to overcome or discount, or, more often, as eventualities about which we shrug our shoulders.

Theorizations of Everyday Disruption

Sociologists have long taken interest in the disruptions and hiccups that seem to occur during any social situation. The social interactionist model of analysis popularized by Erving Goffman probably remains the most influential example. For Goffman (1956, 1963, 1967), social life is embodied and grounded in practical actions and directly observable through empirical analysis. For him, what often *appears* stable or coherent (like "society") is in fact the careful and painstaking process of repeated day-to-day interactions. These interactions take on the appearance of stability through their repetition, but, in reality, this sense of maintenance is a minor miracle, for disruptions that threaten to undo their predictability and orderliness are constant. Every communication risks the potential of disturbances. In essence, the Goffmanian view of attention is as a series of attempts to foreground or background certain things that arise over the course of any situation—that is, how people perceive which things are relevant or significant versus which things are irrelevant or worthy of ignoring (Brekhus 2015, 25).

Goffman argues that people have a degree of tolerance for disruptions that they can "disattend" or ignore without perceiving the situation as a whole as collapsing (1981, 182). For example, in his essay on the performance of a lecture, Goffman details how distracting "noises" often arise whenever people gather to pay attention to a speaker. Noises can come from bodily sources such as people breathing, fidgeting, scratching, coughing, or drinking and eating; equipment may fail or malfunction; the speaker's speech patterns may be obscured through a lisp, raspy throat, or thick accent; the presenter may inadvertently pause, ramble, mispronounce words, or make unintended double meanings that elicit snickers from the crowd (183–184). Such incidents—which Goffman attributes to the inevitabilities of "living bodies" acting together (183)—complicate any straightforward account of what "engrossment" in a lecture may mean. In

addition, the audience's attention may "skip along" or "dip in and out of" the lecturer's arguments, toggling between the subject matter itself and other, seemingly irrelevant details in its manner of presentation, even if the lecture is ultimately deemed successful (166). Attentiveness, properly maintained, requires the continual ignoring of details that, if brought to the foreground, would "discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters" (Goffman 1956, 87).

In his 1967 book *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, sociologist Harold Garfinkel goes even further than Goffman in elaborating the process by which people make their way through disruptions. Laying out his "principles of ethnomethodology," Garfinkel (1984, 67) argues that the rules guiding people's actions are themselves continually "discovered, created, and sustained" in different permutations, as opposed to being stable sets of "social norms" that individuals simply apply or internalize. The rules we follow must be constantly decided upon and adapted to the specifics of the situation (32). Similar to Goffman, Garfinkel notes how lifeworlds contain innumerable small fractures that arise and require temporary modification or improvisation of the rules in order to move forward (what he calls the "et cetera clause" of social contracts) (73). Take one example: roadway stop signs. Most U.S. drivers know the laws designating right-of-way at stop signs. However, any driver is also aware that rules can actually be quite flexible and prone to small adaptations at a moment's notice: two cars can arrive at the intersection at the same time; one car might begin moving before it is "their turn" to go; etc. In these situations, drivers must suddenly attend to the scene and deliberate about how to continue forward—perhaps gesturing to the other car to "go ahead" or pausing to allow the delinquent driver to move through. The social is therefore marked by many contingencies, and must be forever reinvented and reworked as unplanned incidents ("et ceteras") arise.

Goffman and Garfinkel provide useful ways of conceptualizing why there is often such a wide gulf between the standards of behavior by which people say they abide and how they are observed to "actually" act in practice. It is not that people are unable to live up to the codes of conduct established by these standards; rather, these codes are always open to modifications and exceptions through the very fact that they are actualized and put into practice (Livingston 1987, 3). Garfinkel keenly observes that justifications usually come *after* actions rather than before them; each person moves through a series of "lively inner states" before ultimately trying to rationalize what they do within the boundaries of simpler frameworks (Garfinkel 1984, 72, 114).

At the same time, these sociological theories are limited by their ultimate emphasis on everyday stability. Even as they acknowledge the constant presence of interferences, the social-interactionist and the ethnomethodologist emphasize how people try to ignore or work past these disruptions in order to organize their lives in ways that ultimately feel predictable, accountable, and meaningful (Garfinkel 1984, 33; Livingston 1987, 18). As such, these sociological perspectives tend to be focused on how people achieve feelings of classification and order: even though errors are recognized as essential to the everyday, the success of social life lies primarily in how actors work through disturbances to reach durability, even if fragile and contingent. This has spurred criticisms from some scholars that such understandings of daily life produce fairly "anemic" views of human beings, particularly if we try to take interferences and distractions seriously in and of themselves, and not primarily as incidents or anomalies that actors attempt to repair (Pugh 2009, 52).

Numerous poststructural scholars in critical cultural studies have also focused on this constant disruptiveness within everyday actions, but they argue that we cannot simply read it as oriented toward or contained by notions of social order. More to the point, they argue that

perhaps these disruptions *shouldn't* be entirely contained, even if it were practically possible. Instead, we might focus on the various (often quite irrational and "nonsteady") processes and occurrences erupting all around us during our routines, rather than the stable products such routines are said to be working toward (Battaglia 1995, 2; Stewart 2007). For Gilles Deleuze (2004, 179), this project requires that we recognize how "every structure is a multiplicity of virtual coexistence." What Deleuze is trying to convey here is that within and around anything we can describe as structured, stable, or ordered, there are multiple forces and processes at work: things that could happen, are about to happen, have happened, or are currently happening; messy or confusing mixes of causes and effects; indescribable states or feelings that may contradict the tidy and rational appearance that the structure gives off; etc. No matter how predictable or ordered it sometimes may appear, our reality contains so many bubbling, moving components—none of which can ever be adequately described or analyzed in full—that we must take any individual action as a "singularity"—that is, as something so full of multiple causes and so unique to its particular place and time that it will never be 100 percent replicated again (see also Seigworth 2006, 121). For Felix Guattari (2008, 24), this means that our subjectivity (up to and including what we think of as our "interior life") is never one single thing, but instead is a series of "components of subjectification, each working more or less on [their] own." Or, as Deleuze (1994, 75) phrases it, "Underneath the self which acts are little selves which contemplate and which render possible both the action and the active subject. We speak of our 'self' only in virtue of these thousands of little witnesses which contemplate within us" (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 311). These thousands of little details of experience tend to precede our attempts to classify them (Leys 2011; Massumi 2002, 27; Thrift 2008, 5).

The challenge of this perspective is how to adequately account for the *unpredictability*

and *irreducible complexity* of life rather than arranging it into premade explanations about how things work. Various scholars of affect have cautioned against trying to describe ordinary practices in discursive or structural terms, arguing that doing so has a taming effect on them or treats the ordinary as a "dead effect" of explanatory systems in which "everything is always already somehow a part" (Stewart 2007, 1; see also Guattari 2008, 37). At the same time, it is important not to merely reverse our value poles, effectively implying that orderliness is undesirable while disorderliness is "good." For this reason, I agree with Lawrence Grossberg's call for analyses that account for how people try to fashion meanings out of the affective currents in their lives. We can consider the struggles that occur over how to define experiences while still acknowledging how selective these attempts at definition ultimately are (Grossberg 1992, 82). In her critique of affect studies, Margaret Wetherell (2012, 19) makes the point that it is often "meaning-making" discourses that make affect powerful and provide it with the means to circulate. John Shotter describes this project as detailing the "worlds of meaning" we create all the time, while still "noticing the ever present background flow of spontaneously unfolding, reciprocally responsive inter-activity between us and our surroundings" (2004, 457). In other words, in the sometimes contentious interplay between the foregrounded and backgrounded elements of our surroundings, we should consider why particular types of occurrences are marked as irrelevant at certain times and not others.

These various theorizations of disruption have several uses for thinking about everyday film and television attention practices. For one, they suggest, as Charles Acland (2003, 47) has compellingly argued, that media situations are sets of conditions unfolding in time, which always carry "a degree of unpredictability" since "no two screenings are absolutely identical." If we focus on these different conditions of watching, we also recognize that "watching is not a

straightforward activity," but in reality "consists of a variety of behaviors, actions, moods, and intentions" (57). The act of viewing is often defined against its perceived opposites: the ever-present objects, happenings, impulses, and moods hovering on the periphery that may, at an instant, foreground themselves. Any process of watching, even when deemed successful, also contains potential and actual moments of not-watching (Hassoun and Gilmore 2017, 104). Guattari describes this push-and-pull as a form of "polyphonic subjectivity":

> When I watch television, I exist at the intersection: 1. of a perceptual fascination provoked by the screen's luminous animation which borders on the hypnotic, 2. of a captive relation to the narrative content of the program, associated with a lateral awareness of surrounding events (water boiling on the stove, a child's cry, the telephone…), 3. of a world of fantasms occupying my daydreams. My feeling of personal identity is thus pulled in different directions. (1995, 16)

From this intersection of forces, almost any instance of screen attention can potentially be described as threatened by "distractions," depending on how audience members notice and understand the many aspects of the social, mental, physical, and spatial world in motion around and within them.

One difficulty that audiences (including my participants) often have with this process of classifying attention versus distraction is that the behaviors we may, at face value, describe as disruptive to the act of spectatorship may actually be part of what make spectatorship itself feel full and lived-in. For instance, Michel de Certeau details how reading unavoidably involves certain forms of bodily reaction that may often seem in excess of the actual reading process. Even when "docile and silent," the reader's body still produces "subconscious gestures, grumblings, tics, stretching's, rustlings, unexpected noises, in short a wild orchestration" of sounds and movements (1984, 175); the reader's eyes may drift across the page; their mind may take off on some "meditative flight" spurred by the words on the page (170). These "detours and drifts" cannot be separated fully from the act of reading itself, for they are what make the act

whole.

Given these conditions of potential co-constitution between attentiveness and its opposite, it becomes challenging to separate the two, or, when placing value on each of them, to definitively state that one is good or one is bad. To clarify, not every discourse about film and television viewing necessarily takes distraction to be a negative or undesirable thing (as my other chapters detail at length). However, for audiences that *did* state an investment in maintaining their attention toward a movie or program for any length of time, the ever-looming presence of "distractions" stood as a frequent challenge—leading to popular wisdom that it is impossible to ever "just sit down and really watch something." To a large extent, this understanding of distraction as interference relies on certain constructions of what truly attentive media watching entails and how such constructions coincide with particular viewing spaces. Therefore, before discussing how my participants framed the interferences in their own media attention, it is worth pausing to consider what form some of these discourses have taken and how they have informed arguments in cinema and media studies about spectatorship.

Constructions of Total Attention

Asking participants to detail what interference-free concentration looks like at home meant inevitably some discussion of the movie theater. Even if they did not describe themselves as frequent or especially devoted theatergoers, most respondents would readily identify the theater setting as "the purest form of attention," a context where the site is arranged to be a "welcome black box of forced attention" and most people dedicate themselves to the task of "just watching." According to these constructions, the screen "is larger than us, and we surrender to its duration (staying until it has finished) and abandon material reality (sitting still in seats provided)"

(Fowler and Voci 2011).

Conceptualizing theatergoing in this way relies on many historically- and culturally-contingent norms about the separateness of theaters from other aspects of everyday life (Casetti 2009, 60; Wasson 2005, 76). There is a degree of unacknowledged Euro-American cultural specificity at play in assuming that theatergoing and distraction-reduction are even necessarily synonymous: many movie theater contexts outside the West have been noted for their social and communicative functions quite different from goals of quiet, forward-facing spectatorship (Athique 2013; Hahn 1994; Rai 2009). Even in the U.S., these ideas about spectatorship have never been clear-cut. For example, treating theatrical sites as enclaves of attention is inseparable from debates about whether theaters should be fully darkened (Johnson 2014; Pedulla 2012, 21), architectural developments in theater design from the 1930s onward intended to help viewers streamline their vision to the front of the auditorium rather than to other details around the room (Friedberg 2006, 164; Szczepaniak-Gillece 2012), and shifting managerial efforts to define and intervene in behaviors deemed "unruly" or contrary to the movie situation (Acland 2003, 231–232; Hassoun 2016). Moreover, as Barbara Klinger (2006, 19) notes, different moviegoing contexts influence the normative consumption patterns at play in specific venues: for example, people probably have different degrees of tolerance for peripheral occurrences at an arthouse as opposed to a drive-in or a porn theater (e.g. Daly 1999). These norms can also shift significantly over time: under continuous admission practices during the classical Hollywood era, for instance, it was not unusual for patrons to enter or leave programs at any time, "dropping into" the theater at arbitrary points (Bordwell 2011; Hawkins 2000, 38). The many social contexts and practices of theatrical spectatorship are too diverse and contradictory to be covered adequately by any one model (Arnold 1990, 44).

Even if we could comprehensively detail all the many social contexts of the theater, it still might not reveal that much about the "messy humanity" of those contexts (Acland 2012, 169). Returning to the sociological and critical work on disruptiveness detailed above, we can see that, even with the presence of "norms" of conduct, there is always the potential of ruptures and violations as audiences try to enact and move through those norms. For instance, in their ethnographic observations of multiplex screenings of *Batman* (dir. Tim Burton, 1989), Camille Bacon-Smith and Tyrone Yarbrough (1991) found that, even as viewers largely responded to the film in socially-appropriate ways, there were numerous instances of chit-chatting or sleeping that would occur at inconsistent points throughout the feature. Although the conventions of certain spaces make particular distractors more or less likely, unforeseen incidents can arise at a moment's notice. There is little to stop an unwanted noise from occurring, for such noises are often part and parcel of the process of trying to watch anything (Acland 2003, 57). For as much as theaters are treated as specialized sites shielded from distractors, it is clear that a great deal of potentially noncinematic activities continue to pervade them in different circumstances.

Regardless, preserving a perceived *possibility* of total theatrical attention seemed to be an important one for many respondents. Even though their actual theatergoing experiences frequently troubled these idealized conceptions (as discussed below), the theater still functioned as a seemingly-straightforward shorthand for total and intensified attentiveness. This was particularly the case in my cinephile group, echoing longstanding discourses of cinephilia that frequently attribute special qualities to theater viewing said to not be as easily achieved in other viewing sites (Goodsell 2014, 15–17). The theater continues to loom large in cinema scholarship as well. Charles Acland (2009, 148) notes that, whatever social and technological changes over the past decades, theatrical projections "tenaciously reside in the scholarly imagination as part of

a foundational definition of cinema." In more ways than one, the "dream screen" of film culture remains the theatrical one, a singular concentration of vision in the middle of a darkened and silenced auditorium that facilitates total viewer absorption.

The persistence of this theoretical total-ness attention across the history of media studies—what we might call "the myth of total cinematic concentration"[1]—is unsurprising given the importance of attentiveness for creating arguments about the "ideal spectator." In the classical film theory of Hugo Munsterberg (2002), for example, the ability of cinematic devices to hold and direct attention was important evidence for the legitimacy of film as an art form worthy of academic study.[2] Most notably, the apparatus theories that dominated film studies for much of the 1970s and 1980s took presumptions about the enraptured gaze of theater spectators as a crucial effect and condition of the ideological importance of cinema (Baudry 1974; Metz 1982; Mulvey 1975). Christian Metz (1982, 96) phrased this most directly, claiming that the "institution of the cinema requires a silent, motionless spectator, a vacant spectator" whose sense of self "filtered out into pure vision." For Jean-Louis Baudry (1974, 44), the theater functioned as a cave entirely enclosed from the outside world where audiences' attentions were "chained, captured, or captivated" by the apparatus before them.

The spectatorial assumptions of apparatus theory have, of course, been widely criticized since the 1980s (e.g. Carroll 1988), but the myth of total cinematic concentration lives on in softer form across a wide range of film and media studies work on theater viewing. Cultural theorist Paul Virilio (1994, 21) argues that film auditoriums organize themselves totally around

[1] My appropriation here of Andre Bazin's (2005) "myth of total cinema" is more than convenient wordplay. If Bazin located a "guiding myth" within the history of film toward the achievement of "realism," so we may also suggest an impulse in many scholarly constructions of spectatorship toward certain achievements of attentiveness.

[2] This privileging of focused attention as indication of a work's impact or social significance has many examples throughout the intellectual history of visuality. For example, certain lineages of art history have argued that a work's absorptiveness is key to its experience and legitimacy as "art" (e.g. Fried 1980). Thank you to Matthew Von Vogt for pointing this out to me.

the screen when the lights fall, "dissolving" all of the patrons' bodies within. Lev Manovich (2001, 96) writes that the medium of cinema was a significant break from painting in that it compelled its viewers to "concentrate completely" and disregard all physical space outside, while Volker Pantenburg (2014, 337) contends that film watching involves a "rigorous exclusion of external influences." The cognitivist film scholar Carl Plantinga states that theaters often create feelings of "somber reflection" that make it more likely for audiences to give their "full attention" (quoted in Nuwer 2013). To explain how certain media can create "immediate" experiences, fan scholar Paul Booth (2010, 7–8) offers an image of "bleary-eyed" cinema viewers so immersed in their viewing that they virtually forget what they were even doing. It has become commonplace for academics to refer to movie theater viewing (whether in regard to the medium as a whole or to specific bodies of films) as embodying a kind of suspension and separation from other daily processes (e.g. De Luca 2016, 28). The definition of possible distractions here risks being infinitely broad: a distraction could be effectively anything disturbing regular patterns of behavior or detracting from absorption. In other words, a distraction could theoretically be any reminder of life beyond the boundaries of the screen.

The myth of total cinematic concentration has also continued across many studies that have relied on arguments of medium specificity that define film against television. John Ellis's book *Visible Fictions* is probably the most influential and still widely-cited example of this tendency (what John Caldwell (1995, 25) has skeptically called "glance theory"). The main argument of glance theory holds that while the film screen presumes a "spectator who is engaged in an activity of intense and relatively sustained attention," the television cultivates a more "casual" mode of viewing owing to the constant flow of "other concerns and activities occurring around the domestic space" (Ellis 1992, 24, 169). Cinema viewing is attentive, sustained;

television viewing is distracted, frequently under threat of interruption. Even affect scholar Brian Massumi (2002, 139) has drawn from this dichotomy, arguing that television spectatorship "fosters a certain inattention" as compared to the more intensive concentration around movies.

Glance theory's assumptions about the fundamental distractedness of domestic viewing have been significant roadblocks toward more considerations of film viewing on television screens at home. Charles Acland (2003, 57), Barbara Klinger (2006, 3), and Katrina Aveyard (2016, 143) note how domestic viewing is almost always taken to be more "ordinary" (read: unstable, piecemeal, or inconsistent) than other locations.[3] As a result, screens (such as televisions) situated within domestic space have most often been characterized as objects for which attention is delegated in an off-and-on manner in relation to countless other routine, daily activities (McCarthy 2001, 225). Partly to account for these other patterns of spectatorship, scholars since the 1980s have rightfully moved to decenter the theater's "pure screen" from our dominant conceptions of cinema and instead consider the integration of film viewing within the home and beyond (Allen 2013, 32; Caldwell 2009, 170). Ien Ang (1991, 163) has summarized this contextualist approach to domestic viewing as a "radical blurring" between viewing and non-viewing: "people constantly move in and out of 'television audience' as they integrate 'viewing behaviour' proper with a multitude of other concerns and activities in radically contingent ways."

Even though cinema has existed in such domestic sites in some form or another throughout its history (Klinger 2006, 6), the popularization of home VHS and DVD technologies in the 1980s and 1990s spurred an increase in discourses about the "death of cinema" based on

[3] The devaluing of domestic life with "the ordinary" is impossible to disentangle from feminized understandings of the home, as Rita Felski (1999/2000) has importantly noted. The gendered connotations of home work in multiple directions, however, for just as home stands in these discourses as a site of uncontained or irrelevant activity, it functions in other discourses as an ordered or repetitive grounding. Chapter 2 explores this stabilized notion of the home in more detail, while Chapter 3 analyzes the gendered operations of home watching.

some presumptions about theatrical norms (Cheshire 1999; Gilbert 1992; Sontag 1996). For all their varied concerns with changes in film technology, the fragmenting of mass culture, or the end of a certain kind of art cinema, these writings relied on a base argument that the shift to video and home spectatorship was dissolving the specialness of cinema (attendant, enveloped) into television-like watching environments (distracted, arbitrary). Indeed, much of the early academic work on video cultures in the 1990s emphasized "the glance" as one of its defining features (Corrigan 1991, 46). The textual manipulability brought on by the VCR's ability to pause, rewind, and fast-forward threatened to collapse the viewer's sustained attention. Instead of being kept in rapt separation from everyday interruptions, the video consumer supposedly held free reign to modify the flow of the text to accommodate random occurrences in the home around them (Hansen 1993, 198; Tashiro 1991, 15). What was once special would become banal and disregarded.

Concerns about home video's corrupting influence on viewers' attentional fortitudes have a few important legacies in contemporary discussions of home viewing distractions. First, they underline emergent assumptions about the effect of digital and Internet technologies on home attention. If video viewers were said to customize their entertainment watching to respond to the distractions around them (for example, pausing to address a crying baby), the digital user is assumed to be surrounded by so many incoming communications that the mere act of trying to pay attention is always threatened by the potential of tipping into fragmented multitasking. Media scholars have peppered their accounts of changing viewing habits in the streaming era with images of multi-windowed, hyper-networked landscapes in which cinema must now

compete for attention (Casetti 2011; Daly 2008; Friedberg 2006).[4] Francesco Casetti (2009, 62) argues that film is now inextricably absorbed within the flow of other media activities around the house. In one recent study of home technology management, researchers similarly concluded that we can no longer assume that the television set is even at the attentional center of the living room when so many other screen options exist in simultaneity with it (Evans, Coughlan, and Coughlan 2017, 192).

A second development of video and the domestic embeddedness of film has been recurring discourses about home behaviors invading the sanctity of the movie theater. Once films at home were understood as being watched in the "distracted manner of the television viewer" (Keathley 2006, 25)—with frequent talking, moving, pausing, and cell phone checks—it became simple to argue that theater patrons were carrying these learned "bad habits" into the auditorium (see Hassoun 2016). Chuck Tryon (2009a, 78) explains how these grumbles about declines in theater etiquette rely on straightforward binaries between private versus public behavior, with the former inappropriately bleeding into the latter. These are not value-neutral distinctions, as Christena Nippert-Eng has illustrated: the public or private status of a thing is never self-evident, but rather relies on ongoing negotiations about how accessible it should be to certain groups of people (2010, 108). Case in point, many of my own study participants readily discussed all of the "annoying things that people do" in public theaters even as they still regarded theaters overall as sites for undisturbed, attentive viewing. Many complained about the bright lights from nearby patrons pulling out their cell phones to text or web surf, while others had anecdotes on how particular films were "ruined" because another viewer "just wouldn't stop talking and shut up." One male respondent in the cinephile group recounted how he once left early during a screening

[4] Even as they wrote before streaming technologies gained more popular life, Bolter and Grustin's (1999, 232) conception of digital spectatorship suggested a "self whose key quality is not so much 'being immersed' as 'being interrelated and connected'" to other windows and networks.

of *The Dark Knight* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008) when a woman next to him began clipping her nails.

Although many respondents complained about the presence of individual bad habits in the theater, it was clear that the theater as a whole could be marked as susceptible to distractions by virtue of its unpredictability as a public space. One respondent, Nancy, described her distrust of theatergoing this way:

> **Nancy:** If you're in a theater, people are always getting up to go to the bathroom or coming in really late or the food they bring in can be really distracting, making you want to go out and pay for some concession junk. When you're home alone, you're more comfortable. You can arrange your seating environment. You do a better job of minimizing distractions at home than when you're at a movie theater, because there's so many things you can't control in a public movie theater with all these other people involved.

Other respondents echoed these arguments, pointing to everything from popcorn smells to the glow of auditorium exit signs as uncontrollable elements of the theater that made their attention more volatile. Klinger (2006, 24) notes the rise of reformative discourses that reverse the older theater-attention/home-distraction binary. Here, the movie house emerges as the environment of potential distractions (saddling theaters with behaviors previously associated with home viewing), while the home is recast as the more controllable, predictable, and isolated site where watching is more likely to be unimpeded. This has opened an array of questions about how audiences try to re-center the home as a place of minimal disruption, especially against the many perceived threats to attentional fortitude discussed above.

Reconstructing the Home as Attentive

The possibility of reconstructing homes as environments of sustained attention has attracted significant interest in film studies over the past twenty years, much of it a reaction against earlier

work that had characterized video and home viewing as signaling the end of cinema. A significant percentage of this work has been around cinephilia—perhaps unsurprising given Jason Roberts's (2015) observation that cinephile discourses frequently use moments of technological change as opportunities to unsettle myths about cinema's medium specificity while still affirming and preserving other core elements of it (see also Doane 2002, 228; Elsaesser 2005, 38–39). In this case, the specific space of the theater may be pushed aside, but the ideal of sustained, total attention remains. Indeed, most academic constructions portray cinephiles as particularly exacting and deliberate in their film viewing environments. Melis Behlil (2005, 116) characterizes cinephilia as a mode of watching that is hyper-attuned to the contexts of viewing, with cinephiles frequently describing the "exact circumstances in which they watched a particular film," such as the weather outside, what they ate or drank while they viewed it, and so on. Along this line, de Valck and Hagener (2005, 13) describe a split in post-video-era cinephilia between "going out" versus "staying in," with proponents of the latter defending home viewing as allowing for comparable types of immersion as one would find in a theater space. For the people I interviewed who self-identified as cinephiles (though, I must note, not *exclusively* among them), the importance of maintaining some level of close attention toward films, even when "staying in," came up as a recurring concern.[5] This concern often manifested as a project of trying to separate film-watching from other processes of daily life and defending their concerns about attention against perceptions about the distractedness of "how most other people watch things."

Scholars have described this project of making the home into a theater-like haven for

[5] Importantly, this emphasis placed on close attention seemed to extend to both non-mainstream art films and more popular and blockbuster fare for many in the cinephile group, some of whom talked abstractly about the importance of paying attention to cinema as an art form. Nevertheless, differences in acceptable levels of attention occasionally arose for specific kinds of films. Chapter 2 explores in more detail how logics of attention intersect with people's perceptions of textuality.

attention as a process of continually separating the screen from other processes of daily life—what William Boddy (2008, 142) refers to as the "theatricalization of domestic consumption" and Francesco Casetti (2009, 65) calls the "readaptation of the environment." Here, we see the myth of total cinematic concentration adapted toward new sites but retaining its theatrical associations, with serious film viewers encouraged to consciously structure their viewing areas and home behavior to best approximate a distinctive and privatized conception of moviegoing. One set of prescriptions by U.S. critic and filmmaker Fred Camper for the Criterion Collection DVD release of *By Brakhage: Vol. 1* is particularly instructive:

> [I]t's especially important not to view [avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage's] films in the way most are accustomed to screening videos. I would suggest trying to approximate the conditions of a cinema as much as possible…The room should be completely dark. One should sit fairly close to, and perhaps at eye level with or even lower than, the screen. The projected film image has, in its clarity and colors and light, a kind of iconic power that is key to Brakhage's work, and it's important to try to see whatever monitor one is viewing these films on in a similar way…The interruptions of chatting, people coming into and leaving the room, the phone ringing, and so on can prove almost completely destructive to these films' subtle delicacies. (Camper 2010)

Such recommendations combine ideas about spatial management (darkening the room, positioning the screen away from passersby) and bodily comportment (increasing your proximity to the screen) to present pure viewing as a result of individual decision-making and willpower. In her qualitative interviews and surveys with nearly one hundred cinephiles, Uma Dinsmore-Tuli (2000, 324) identified this tendency for passionate film viewers to profess recreating "the optimal conditions for focused attention" at home—dimming lights, preparing food and snacks beforehand, not answering phone calls, and so on. She concluded that her respondents' dedications to "cinematizing" their domestic viewing environments were evidence that John Ellis's theories about home spectatorship were incorrect: the "distractions of the domestic viewing environment are not necessarily a barrier to intensely attentive spectatorship" (327).

These arguments about the preservation of uninterrupted home viewing have perhaps crystallized most memorably in the image of the home theater. Barbara Klinger analyzes the home theater as a special middle-class investment of architectural and monetary resources, like the installation of large screens, premium sound systems, mock theater seating, or high-resolution projectors. Such investments—sometimes literally squirrelled away in separate dens, TV rooms, or basements protected from the threats of the rest of the home—aim to consecrate viewing within a "fortress of solitude" drawing from audiovisual ideals in public film screenings but supposedly protected from those sites' public rowdiness (Klinger 2006, 9; see also Hawkins 2000, 39; Tryon 2009b, 49). By purporting to "shut out" and control the interferences commonly associated with home life, home theater discourses also aim to recuperate traditionally feminine-coded environments as a masculine project of control and technical prowess (Klinger 2006, 45). Many respondents in my cinephile study group couched their very identities *as* cinephiles on these notions of sacralizing and consecrating practices of film-watching, and several explicitly drew from ideas of domestic theatricalization when setting up their own viewing spaces. Philip described his routines of watching movies by projecting images onto a plain white sheet (he assured me that he took care to stretch out the sheet as much as possible to smooth out any distracting ripples and reduce air flow). Another cinephile respondent, Ben, described in detail his self-described "very particular" investment in a 32-inch television set, Blu-ray player, and La-Z-Boy recliner, explaining that "the environment is really important to me."

However, the overwhelming majority of my college student respondents reported not possessing any home theater system, and many of those who lived with roommates did not own a television set at all. Even if some voiced a desire to one day boast a premium projector, surround sound speakers, or a larger television, they admitted that the realities of time, money, or technical

knowhow made that unlikely. This detail is occasionally lost in the scholarly interest about home theaters and domestic theatricalization: the resources and opportunity necessary for establishing certain theater-like conditions have, at their core, deeply grounded class or age divisions (especially considering that a majority of my respondents were college students). In the place of these formal home theater systems, respondents often made-do with other circumstantial workarounds to try to mitigate distractions. This often entailed relatively mundane modifications to the living room during viewing, such as increasing television volume, turning off lights, or pulling down drapes on nearby windows to reduce light infiltration. In other cases, it meant casting other, supposedly "non-ideal" technologies as potentially attentive. For instance, more than half of my cinephile group discussed watching films frequently on a laptop, sometimes because they had few other options when roommates or significant others were using the living room television, but also because they sometimes found laptops to be "more attentive" than televisions overall. For instance, Tom explained how he found his laptop useful due to his ability to use headphones.

> **Dan**: What does it mean to be an attentive viewer?
>
> **Tom:** One of the biggest things is to have your audio right. If you're just listening not through your earbuds but through your speakers, then you can still hear everything else in your environment. So that for me is a big distraction. I started using headphones to watch TV shows recently and my viewing of the show became so much better.
>
> **Dan:** Because you could tune out other noises.
>
> **Tom:** Yeah. Right.
>
> **Dan**: Do you have a busy home?
>
> **Tom**: I live near campus, so it's a pretty busy road, so I always hear cars going around. Some honking. But if I put the headphones on, I can tune that out, I'm more onto it.

Tom's setup is illustrative, not only for how he further equates "better" attention with methods of

separation from his everyday surroundings, but also for how he applied such methods specifically to his laptop-viewing. At the same time, other respondents noted how the use of laptops could present their own attentional challenges: one cinephile, for example, described to me how she always needed to turn off the backlights on her keyboard before starting any movie.

For many cinephile respondents, creating these so-called attentive conditions was a central component of claiming they had "actually watched" something at all. For example, Donna expressed some exasperation when I asked her how important it was to be attentive when watching films at home. Following the template of many home theater discourses, her response explicitly attributed the presence of viewing interferences as a result of individual audience choices.

> **Donna:** …it makes me fundamentally mad to think that people are watching films and not paying attention and not actually taking in the detail. Same thing with TV. If you're watching *True Detective* and you have that on as background noise? You're missing so much of it! I don't know what version of that show you're actually consuming. So it might depend on the content, but if this is interesting film or TV that is worth your time and consideration and you're refusing to engage in it, that makes me really sad. But like I said, people can do whatever they want. But when it's a choice to actually engage with something new, why wouldn't you?

Gordon extended this logic of absolute attention even further, explaining to me the necessity of a "correct mood" and "certain guidelines" necessary to "maximize the pleasure you receive from the entertainment." Like Donna, even though he acknowledged the possibility of other types of watching, he explained the necessity of disregarding other elements of daily life to affirm that one had truly watched all of a film.

> **Dan**: To be fully immerse or attentive, does that mean not multitasking? Is it possible to multitask while staying attentive or engaged?
>
> **Gordon**: I definitely believe there are varying degrees of attention.
>
> **Dan**: Okay, so what are some of those degrees? Or what do you mean by that?

Gordon: I mean, you can still pay attention to a film and do other things. You should just know that you're not getting 100 percent of the content.

Dan: If you're not paying 100 percent attention to a film, does that mean that you're distracted?

Gordon: Probably. I'd say so.

Dan: What does it mean to pay 100 percent attention to a film?

Gordon: To really just ignore everything else.

Dan: When you say 'ignore everything else,' what does that mean?

Gordon: Anything that's not what's on the screen.

This notion of "100 percent attention" arose over several interviews, with some respondents testifying confidently that they regularly maintained full concentration to whatever they watched. More often that not, however, the ideal of full attentiveness was brought up in order for respondents to comment on their inability to ever view anything absolutely or comprehensively, even when they took all the precautions of separating themselves from other domestic distractions.

The ideal goal of perfected attention also complicated many respondents' relationships with playback control options such as pausing, stopping, and rewinding. As early as the 1980s, James Lull (1990, 172) argued that VCRs allowed video subjects to reduce disrupted viewing styles by granting them the ability to freeze content and address surrounding distractors before returning to viewing. Margaret, for example, lived with her parents and watched most of her films in a living room where other family members crossed in and out throughout the day. She reported preemptively pausing the film whenever she heard her mother approaching, explaining to me that she was just "too loud" (Margaret's mother, for her part, would react, "I know! I know! I'm just doing something real quick" upon seeing the paused screen). Other respondents

told me that they would sometimes rewind texts whenever a distraction caused them to miss a plot detail or line of dialogue.

However, many cinephiles I interviewed explained their distrust with pausing or rewinding as appropriate attentional controls. For instance, Catherine explained her personal policy of "watching all the way straight through" whenever possible. Total attention, she argued, was impossible with frequent pausing: "If the movie's doing its job, you should feel that same sort of emotional space…And then all of a sudden, you're yanked out and have to stop watching it, and if you come back…it's like "where do I pick up?" Sometimes, the cinephiliac argument against playback controls fell along explicitly auteurist grounds. Harry asserted that he would never pause a film of his own volition because that was "not the intention of the filmmaker": "If they wanted you to pause, they would have put in an intermission." He similarly distrusted rewinding, arguing that you would not get the chance to watch a clip twice in a movie theater. This discourse echoes Dinsmore-Tuli's (2000, 322) finding that cinephiles often preferred uninterrupted viewings as a "prerequisite for respectful viewing." Joan Hawkins (2000, 35) argues that this skepticism toward altering viewing temporalities partly stems from a sense that changing films from their "original" theatrical spaces of consecration is a form of low culture.

Examining most of the academic references to home theaters over the past few decades might lead one to erroneously conclude that distractions no longer functionally exist for viewers who decide to replicate theatrical conditions or (if they so choose) control video or file playback. More often that not, the sheer existence of efforts to "attentivize" the home is implied to be evidence of their success: take Barry Keith Grant's (2004, 89) aside that there is no longer a need to go to the theater since "we can watch films with optimal viewing conditions on our home theater systems," or Gabriele Pedulla's (2012, 72) assertion that "in regards to attempts to create

the conditions of an auditorium artificially, the telespectator is not necessarily distracted and can even follow a movie very closely." Klinger's (2006) study primarily focuses on discourses about the transformative possibilities of home cinemas drawn from industry promotions and popular magazines and catalogs, while Dinsmore-Tuli's (2000) audience study largely takes participants at their word when they testify to using home technologies to view films "uninterrupted." In many of these accounts, it is difficult to distinguish precisely what the relationships between attention and distraction are, especially if the latter is understood (as people like Gordon defined it above) as "anything" in the home running contra to the content of the screen.

The more we consider how discourses of domestic theatricalization are actually put to practice, the more evident it becomes that home viewing remains a site of constant and unstable attentional negotiation (as was the theatrical setting before it). Even when ostensibly working together to create a "fortress of solitude," the viewer nevertheless exists within a continuum of activities, states, and objects (both ongoing and possible) that exert pressures on the likelihood of certain "non-screen-related" activities from moment to moment. This can include: layout decisions of the home's various screens in relation to other furnishings, geographical or ecological contexts in which the viewer's home is located, how many roommates the viewer has, their ability to watch at certain times, the wakefulness they might feel while watching as a result of earlier actions in the day, their access to a functioning and high-speed Internet connection, their ownership of a pet, and so on. Klinger (2006, 20) suggests as much when she notes how the organization of so-called private homes largely relies on discourses and currents originating from outside the home (see also Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 18).

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I return to the sociological and critical theorizations of disruptiveness to consider how my respondents' attempts to reduce distractions

function as *efforts* to identify and maintain attentiveness in wake of these currents. Far from being a stable application of rules, as so much of the discussion of home viewing suggests, these attempts at *actualizing* the possibilities of attention suggest a continuous and often fragile adaptation of rules to the needs of the moment. In discussing these adaptations, my respondents referred to a wide range of external and internal disruptors that they said frequently worked to "take them out of" whatever they tried to watch.

"External" Disruptors

It is tricky to fully separate the process of viewing from its entanglements with other, seemingly extraneous objects, from the lamp in the corner, to the air conditioner softly humming (or not-so-softly blaring) nearby, to the feeling of the clothes we are wearing. Lily Gurton-Wachter describes this as a problem of selectivity: similar to what Goffman noted about social foregrounding and backgrounding, "paying attention itself always means ignoring a variety of other objects"; thus, "there are always other things that we do not or only barely notice, or things we notice but immediately forget." Ben Highmore (2011, 58) explains this as an inevitability of being human beings attached to a "thingly world": we often may not always notice these things, but we do constantly interact with them and rely on them to mark and manage boundaries around the home (Nansen et al. 2010, 139). The functionality of any media object often relies on its collaborations and competitions with other ordinary objects and sights, including phones, food, couches, tables, shelves, and even pens and paper (Lally 2002, 175). Even constructions of sustained screen attention have often relied on assumptions about the viewer's relationships to particular objects, such as headphones for blocking out surrounding sound (Groening 2016) or chairs to compel viewers to sit up and position their heads forward (Szczepaniak-Gillece 2016,

255). In connected home environments filled with digital technologies, the intermedial interactions between different devices may be so interwoven (with content on one affecting decisions to cue up or stop content on another) that it no longer makes much sense to fully analytically separate them (Evans, Coughlan, and Coughlan 2017; Freedman 2011, 205; Harries 2002, 172; Hassoun 2014).

Most objects have become sufficiently routine that they may no longer hold much direct notice. Critiquing the foundations of John Ellis's glance theory, wherein domestic screens are always in competition with extraneous activities or chores, John Caldwell (1995, 27) says that we "should not jump to theoretical conclusions just because there is an ironing board in the room." I agree with Caldwell's caution against over-reading any particular object or detail that happens to be around a screen. In the context of everyday perception, perhaps an ironing board is "just" an ironing board in most situations, something to be disregarded the majority of the countless times it might be noticed sitting in a corner of the room. At the same time, it is important that we not discount the *possibilities* inherent to the ironing board (or any other object, for that matter) to function as an interference at an instant, temporarily overwhelming the media that are based in that place (McCarthy 2001, 113). My interview respondents generated various lists of ordinary objects and occurrences that they claimed worked to distract them, even when, on the whole, they reported that they watched attentively and unimpeded. In affirming the reality and presence of these things across many, seemingly-disconnected anecdotes, they were effectively acknowledging the possibility for non-screen matters that always-already rested within each of their screen practices (Deleuze 1991, 96). The following is an incomplete sample of some of the more common distractions mentioned.

Technical issues. Any home viewing relies on the continuous functionality of various

delivery and playback technologies—from discs and DVD players to television sets and Internet modems and routers—that may break down or malfunction unpredictably. Particularly with DVDs, the ability to play data off of a disc may rely on the care with which other family members, roommates, or previous renters have treated it. In the case of streaming media, the stability of viewing attention is also embedded within larger systems of electricity grids, content server performances, and Internet connectivity that increasingly deliver content to the home (Aveyard 2016, 147; Tryon 2013)—to say nothing of the geopolitical and ecological conditions that these systems require to function (Starosielski 2015). Without the consistent operation of these conditions, the infrastructure of viewing has the potential to foreground itself in the form of failures, glitches, and other technical problems. Relatively few of my respondents reported technical issues in their viewing diaries, but one cinephile, Philip, was dogged by several over the course of one week. The first arose when he attempted to stream *Mulholland Dr.* (dir. David Lynch, 2001) through his home projector system one evening. In his diary, Philip wrote several steps he took to prepare to watch the film with a friend:

> To prepair [sic] I fed my cats, otherwise they will bother me for food, I closed the blinds to minimize light, gather beer as a beverage and placed my phone in the other room to avoid reading texts. We waited until about 10:30pm to start as to make sure things were dark. Tonight I took the extra step of peeing before hand as I heard this was a long film.

Despite these precautions, Philip's Internet dropped away twenty minutes into the film, and he was forced to stop watching until the connection problem was resolved three days later. Later that week, he and his girlfriend encountered another technical glitch when their rented DVD of *Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates* (dir. Jake Szymanski, 2016) began skipping and pausing due to scratches on the disc surface (Philip explained that he needed to temporarily stop the film at one point to try to "clean the disc extra well"). During our follow-up interview, I asked Philip about these technical errors. He laughed the incidents off as "atypical": there was little he could

do to preempt events like the Internet going out or a scratched disc (except, he joked, "never renting from Redbox again"). Sometimes, "things completely out of your control" just tended to happen that would shut down the viewing entirely; for instance, he said, "my mom was trying to watch a movie once and the bathroom caught on fire." In most cases, however, the disruptors respondents discussed tended to be more routine than catastrophic, and were often tied explicitly to visible and familiar presences both inside and outside the home. As a mediator between outside and inside, one prominent object here was the window.

Windows and outdoor disruptors. The window's longstanding function as a connector between indoors and outdoors (Spigel 1992, 102) sometimes marks it as a bridge for unwanted sights and sounds to invade the viewing room. Light infiltration was the most commonly cited annoyance. Philip, for one, noted to me how he generally avoided watching movies during the day because the glare from nearby windows was too intrusive (though his solution, to watch at night with a "dim light on behind the screen," was also somewhat distracting whenever the light caught his eye). For another cinephile, Gordon, the threat of unwanted daylight motivated him to often cover nearby windows with other objects.

> **Dan:** You mentioned there is a window near your TV. How is the lighting situation in your room?
>
> **Gordon:** Um, the TV is on the south wall. There's a window behind the TV and then two windows on the side walls.
>
> **Dan:** Does light get in?
>
> **Gordon:** Yes. Those few days when I binged all those movies, I tacked, like, a blanket to, over the windows. Because I couldn't watch a movie at noon on a sunny day.
>
> **Dan:** Is that something you did just that one time?
>
> **Gordon:** Well, whenever I did it I would just leave it up for a while. Because it does make it easier to watch.

Dan: In your living room, do you close curtains or anything like that?

Gordon: Yeah, I usually try to close the blinds to reduce the glare, and also to reduce my distractions. Yeah.

Dan: Is it noisy outside?

Gordon: I live by train tracks.

Dan: You hear the trains?

Gordon: Oh yeah, I hear trains. I live by an ambulance dispatch. So I can be doubly bombarded.

Dan: So if you're hearing sirens or trains, what do you do?

Gordon: It depends really on how long it is. I will pause and wait for the train to pass. Especially if our kitchen window is open. It's really loud.

Even when he took the precaution of obscuring or shutting one window, Gordon was unable to account for other sounds that could bleed into the home via other windows. This inability to eliminate the prospect of outdoor interferences (whether because they did not have access to roommates' windows or because lights, sounds, or glimpses of outdoor traffic still managed to bleed through even with the windows closed or covered) led some respondents to conclude that such matters, like technical mishaps, were simply "outside of your control." This lack of control could also apply to interactions with other beings *inside* the home, including pets.

Pets. Many respondents also regarded their household pets as uncontrolled sources of distraction, though their rationalizations about the extent of this interference were more mixed. For example, Annie made it clear that her cat had the potential to so emphatically disrupt viewings that pausing or stopping was required. She detailed one incident that had occurred the previous night during a television binge-watching session.

Annie: Last night we were interrupted because the cat brought a bird in. So this little bird had broken its leg and she was fluttering all over. We had to pause to try and catch it and then clean up all the feathers everywhere. It was a real annoyance. We finally managed to

chase it outside.

Dan: Is it okay?

Annie: I'm sure it's dead by now. It had a broken leg. My cat is murderous. She'll always be bringing stuff in and meowing, which means we need to pause the show, which is really annoying. [laughs] Even if we don't pause anything, she's still meowing.

Other respondents reiterated how tending to pets sometimes required them to pause or walk away from the screen for a few minutes at a time. This was particularly the case with dog owners, who needed to let their animals outside at certain intervals. There was disagreement, however, over whether such outings constituted actual distractions, given that they were sufficiently banal enough that they didn't require "too much focus." As Ben explained, pausing to let the dog out was not "too much of a distraction" because "it only takes a few minutes and I'm still kind of in that mindset of the movie." Larry argued similarly about the process of petting his cat while watching films: "It's a distraction *per se*, but I can still give my attention [to the screen]. You know, that's just like muscle memory. You can be spaced out while petting a cat." In this way, pets occupied a liminal position in respondents' understandings of interference: they were familiar enough to often be backgrounded (the "muscle memory" of petting the cat), but they still maintained enough co-presence in the viewer's mind alongside the media text that they could occasionally become foregrounded (in the case of Annie's meowing, murderous cat).

Computers. As discussed above, numerous respondents reported using their laptops as a primary viewing platform or fallback option if larger screens were not available, citing the intimacy of its use or the ability to use headphones. At the same time, the laptop's ability to host a range of other communication and consumption functions meant that the window playing media content could be in direct competition or "interflow" with other applications or tasks (Brooker 2009, 53). For this reason, some scholarship on laptop viewing has argued that multi-

windowed multitasking is built into the basic operation of the machine (Friedberg 2006, 233). The associations between laptop watching and multitasking were strong enough that one cinephile, Norma, felt compelled to distance herself from them in my conversation with her. For her, it was common sense that checking email while watching a movie in a separate window would be a "confusing and convoluted" process that ruined both activities. This conviction, however, did not stop unintended notifications that still sometimes appeared.

> **Dan:** When you watch on your laptop, do you ever get notifications that pop up?
>
> **Norma**: Sometimes. Skype will pop up if someone is on, but I'll 'X' out of that right away. Same thing with ads. They look really gross and ugly so I'll just exit out of them as soon as I can.
>
> **Dan**: Will they ever pop up in front of the movie screen?
>
> **Norma**: Yeah, it will come up. Not right in front, but maybe in a corner somewhere. And I'll need to exit out of it, because it is distracting. I don't want to be interrupted by that.

Another cinephile, Bobby, shared this reactive approach to handling laptop notifications. Although he also regarded the Internet as a "distracting place" to be separated from the act of movie watching, he was unable to figure out how to change his device's settings to stop receiving notifications about incoming emails, which he claimed semi-regularly popped up as small windows overlaying his media application that he would need to close.

These relationships between windows became more complicated when respondents tried to preserve "real attention" toward the text they were viewing while still maintaining opposing applications in other windows. Albert, for example, frequently left an instant message service running in the background whenever he watched films on his desktop computer.

> **Albert**: I generally have messenger apps open just because I like to be available, but generally I'm not the best at multitasking, so I just leave it at that. I leave it on behind whatever I'm watching.
>
> **Dan**: So the messaging app will just be running out of sight.

Albert: Yeah.

Dan: What if you hear a notification?

Albert: I generally try to be prompt with responding, because it bugs me when people don't respond when I know they're there. I'll message back and unless the conversation is ongoing, I'll get right back to whatever I was watching.

Dan: Do you pause the show?

Albert: Yeah.

Dan: Do you ever not pause it?

Albert: Sometimes, but I'm not good at multitasking, so I usually miss things and I have to go back anyway.

Dan: Do you bring up any other windows or do anything else?

Albert: Nah. I mean, I'll have other stuff open in the background, but it's just stuff that I'll get back to when I'm done watching.

Dan: Do you watch full-screen?

Albert: Yeah, I usually do. Got to get that cinematic experience!

Albert's case presents a complicated negotiation between seemingly-opposed media activities, balancing maintenance of a more "cinematic" watching environment (full-screen viewing window, setting aside "other stuff") with a simultaneous desire to remain "available" for outside messages. As a result, Albert's viewings were routinely interrupted by the need to reply to incoming messages, something he regarded as "multitasking" and contrary to proper viewing. Even with the ability to rewind (which he regarded ambivalently), Albert saw his attentiveness as constantly coexisting with the possibility of instant communication. In this way, the attentive viewer's connection to communication networks beyond the home also often went beyond the laptop to include other personal Internet devices, including, most importantly, phones.

Mobile phones. Of all the common distractor-objects listed by respondents, the most

discussed by far was the mobile phone. This is perhaps unsurprising given the phone's longstanding status as a tool for micro-coordination of social life, and with that, the possibility (or mandate) of managing digital communications in combination with the normative conduct of one's physical environment (Levinson 2006; Ling 2004). As Nippert-Eng (2010, 169) notes, the phone expands the social territories that can plausibly reach us, forcing users to constantly determine how best to move their attentions between virtual and co-present planes as calls, text messages, and notifications arrive (see also Ling 2008). More to the point—as my respondents often noted—these communications could arrive *at any time*, reinforcing a sense that phone ownership meant being "always available," with very little "dead time" outside the possibility of being contacted or needing to respond quickly (Birnholtz, Davidson, and Li 2017; Bittman, Brown, and Wajcman 2009, 674; Rule 2002).[6] Respondents rarely drew explicit distinctions between the *type* of communications that arose through the phone. In its broad sense as a "distracting" object, the phone could deliver social media updates, interpersonal communications with family or friends, or any number of other arbitrary alerts, in addition to work-specific notifications or emails.

For these reasons, some respondents expressed skepticism about the proper place of phones within attentive home viewing (unlike with laptops, very few cinephiles ever said they would watch content on their phones unless absolutely necessary, allowing them to mark the phone as extraneous to the viewing situation). James probably articulated this idea most concisely: when I asked him if it was possible to pay attention to a movie while still looking at your phone, he replied, "By definition, no. You can only focus on one thing at a time." Several respondents spoke about the perils or impossibility of "media multitasking" in order to argue for

[6] There have been excellent studies on the role of mobile phones and 24/7 contactability in post-Fordist labor, where work demands follow the worker into the home (e.g. Crary 2013; Gregg 2011; Spigel 2010). I discuss the relationships between home media attention and work in Chapter 3.

the importance of sustaining attention to one screen over another (with the larger screen playing the film or television show holding greater legitimacy).[7] Some cinephiles discussed physically removing phones from the viewing space to reduce the risk of distraction. Margaret, for example, described how she decided she needed to put her phone "out of arm's reach, just somewhere else" when she started getting "invested" in watching *Sunrise* (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1927) for the first time. Similarly, Gordon explained how he handled the phone during a viewing of *The Impossible* (dir. J.A. Bayona, 2012).

> **Gordon:** It's a very gripping movie. It's very emotional.
>
> **Dan**: What did you do with your phone for that one?
>
> **Gordon**: It was charging in a different room.
>
> **Dan**: Why was it in another room?
>
> **Gordon**: Well, whenever I was about to start the movie I was like, oh, my phone's low on battery. So I'm like, okay, I'll put it away anyway, so I'm not … I don't feel the urge to do anything…
>
> **Dan**: Did you look at the phone as you watch?
>
> **Gordon**: No. [laughs] The credits were rolling and then I was like, oh, I missed a call, I guess.

Other respondents tried to control "the urge" to react to incoming alerts by silencing or powering down their phones even as they left the devices sitting close by. This was relatively rare, however, as many more explained how the potential of alerts made it difficult for them to entirely divorce themselves from their devices. Andy told me he would sometimes lock his phone into a "Do Not Disturb" mode during viewings, which required that all texts and calls needed to be sent twice to actually get through to him. He explained that this ensured he could watch films in relative peace, while still allowing him to receive calls and messages "if someone

[7] Chapter 2 discusses many exceptions to this, where respondents explained valuing attention to the phone over the film or television screen.

really needs to get to you."

This specter of "necessary" communications was a widely-stated justification for keeping phones on and nearby, even if people claimed that they were increasing their risk of cellular distraction. In some cases, the phone's presence was so "tethered" to people's daily lives that the prospect of spending time away from it struck respondents (including cinephiles) as a distraction in and of itself (Turkle 2011, 157). Norma offered one explanation.

> **Dan:** Why don't you turn off your phone?
>
> **Norma:** I think there's a part of me that wants to stay connected to the world around me, so if I'm getting a text from my mom during the movie or if an emergency comes up, I'd like to be notified. I think I would get a little bit anxious not staying connected to the world. If my phone were completely off, I'd probably get a little distracted just thinking about what could be happening on it. I might be missing out on something or someone might want to get ahold of me. So I wouldn't turn off my phone for two hours while watching something. I think that's too long to be silent.
>
> **Dan:** Is it possible to be completely attentive to a movie if your phone is on?
>
> **Norma**: It probably depends on if you're constantly getting texts or something like that. If your phone goes a substantial period without any calls or texts or any Snapchats or something, then it's totally fine. I'm never staring at my phone wondering why nobody *isn't* texting me.

Phone practices like Norma's—not intentionally using the phone, but keeping it near just to "stay connected"—opened up an array of additional negotiations about when to actually check the phone for received messages. In this way, keeping the phone close "as needed" recalls Brian Massumi's observation that acts of preemption, though done with the intent of avoiding future occurrences, often have the effect of bringing "the future into the present" and making the present feel consequences of future events whether or not they ever actually happen (quoted in Coleman 2018, 205). At the same time that some respondents kept their phones nearby to avoid the distraction of speculating about notifications, the phone's ability to always possibly bring in new messages still made many of them feel the impulse to check it anyway. For example, Betty

told me that she usually kept her phone silenced when watching things, but this meant that she would preemptively check the screen every fifteen to twenty minutes to see if she received any new alerts. The phone was always easy to glance at, whether or not new messages arrived.

Even so, many respondents still talked about phone alerts as interferences they could deliberately ignore or mitigate—although, similar to the ambiguities surrounding pausing or pet care activities discussed above, there was disagreement about how much engagement with the phone constituted a real distraction. For cinephiles like James (who said that phones were categorically distracting), the main frustration with his phone was that he knew that he could not control the impulse to "always check" it when new text messages arrived, even if he did not want to. Other respondents claimed they had a range of strategies for dealing with the phone's interruptions: some said they would mentally note received messages (whether aurally or through a glance), but would refrain from responding until the viewing ended; others said they would only answer calls, while ignoring texts; still others said they would only check texts for certain people they knew (one woman told me she programmed her phone to flash different colors based on the type of notification, letting her know if she could ignore it or not). Among respondents who reported regularly picking up their phones and answering texts, there was also disagreement about how much response time was "too distracting": some claimed that pausing or rewinding the film or program was necessary for any length of message, while others argued it was not distracting to leave it running so long as the phone response time wasn't too drawn-out (justifiable lengths of time ranged from a short as five seconds to as long as two minutes).

Ultimately, as with many other objects, the mobile phone's ability to interfere rested largely on the unpredictable ways it could interact with screenings. The phone could be marked as distracting whether its notifications were actual *or* possible. Whenever their phones chimed, it

was difficult for subjects to know how much focus the message required, leaving them with the choice of either letting the phone alone (but leaving the presence of the message linger in their minds) or attempting to address the message right away (which could take their attention for an unknown amount of time). Many of these uncertainties were illustrated in one exchange with Laura, who said that she kept her phone within eyeshot, but never answered it during films.

> **Dan**: Do you own a mobile phone?
>
> **Laura**: Yeah, I'm not a huge user of it. I definitely don't use it while I'm watching movies.
>
> **Dan:** Is it in arm's reach when you're sitting down?
>
> **Laura:** Yeah, usually I can see maybe if a message popped up, but I don't answer it.
>
> **Dan**: So maybe take me through this. You're watching a movie with your laptop, you see that you received a text of some sort on your phone. You say you don't look at it?
>
> **Laura:** Um… usually it's sort of automatic. Like I would see it, I'd see it light up and it would draw my eye, but I'm not going to answer it otherwise.
>
> **Dan:** Is that an intentional choice?
>
> **Laura:** Yes.
>
> **Dan:** Why?
>
> **Laura:** I feel like that's too much of a distraction. That's *choosing* to be distracted rather than something happening to you. If I answer my phone, I don't know if that text is going to be a 'two-second-and-put-it-away,' or if I'm going to need to do something more for longer, so I usually don't want to even engage with that.

As Laura's account suggests, notions of choice, intentionality, and decision-making played an important role in many subjects' discussions of interferences. Most respondents framed distractions as external variables that invaded their screening set-ups, which individual viewers could then choose to ignore, lessen, or work against.

In this way, attentive subjects were characterized by how they positioned themselves in

relation to unpredictable "others" outside the self. Partly for this reason, many respondents (cinephiles especially) explained how attentive viewing environments were best maintained by watching things as separate from other interrupting objects, pets, and people as possible. This was especially prominent in interviews with people who lived with roommates: even in viewing set-ups that respondents claimed were otherwise attentive, there was still the risk of other people bringing in unwanted elements such as phones, smelly foods, or loud chatter.[8]

However, as many of the above accounts of phone use (or non-use) also make clear, it was not always easy for respondents to separate their conscious decisions from spontaneous reflexes. Even though Laura agreed that not using her phone was an "intentional choice," she still referred to her occasional glances to it as "automatic" and explained her concern that any use of the phone carried the impulsive possibility of her spending more time on the device than she wanted. To some extent, this might speak to specific patterns of use around mobile phones, which tend to be associated with chains of activities or paths of thought that veer quickly away from original intents of use (D'Heer and Courtois 2016, 9; Hassan 2012, 118). It might also relate to the phone's status as a ubiquitous and "calm technology" that is able to "move between the periphery and centre of our attention" without much thought (Galloway 2004, 388). More importantly, though, it gestures toward a larger ambiguity many respondents voiced over whether they or the object were actually "at fault" for distractions, or whether they were fully in control of their attentional fluctuations from moment to moment.[9]

[8] Chapter 4 discusses some difficulties that respondents had with interpreting talk as a signal of attentiveness versus distractedness.

[9] In her analysis of slot machine designs, Natasha Schüll (2012) argues that, despite people's tendencies to discuss technologies *either* as neutral tools with no bearing on our activity *or* as controlling devices that determine our activities, the reality is that patterns of use depend on complex human-machine interactions where agency and control are not straightforward.

Impulsivity and "Internal" Disruptors

James admitted to me that part of his distrust about pausing movies laid less in how it disturbed the regular playback of his film and more in how it created a "better chance" that he might "tangent off" to do something else around the house in the interim. Another cinephile, Harry, told me how, during the diary period, he had deliberately waited to start a movie until after a hockey game had ended—not because he wanted to watch the game, but because he knew he would be constantly tempted to check the score on his phone ("I'd wonder who was winning at certain moments"). Beyond the relatively easy task of identifying specific disruptive objects, many respondents seemed unsure about how to interpret their own impulses, moods, and affective states, which were sometimes less goal-oriented, more difficult to pinpoint, and more likely to change on a whim.

Roxana Morosanu (2016, 30) writes about the difficulty of articulating spontaneous or impulsive behaviors, which often "have no conscious meanings or intentions attributed to them."

> It is hard to describe what spontaneity entails. As a series of actions that you just find yourself doing, spontaneity engenders emotions and sensations that you do not stop in order to observe and to translate into words. If you would stop to notice them, you would stop being spontaneous. It is not in the nature of spontaneous actions to be self-reflexive or to lend themselves to the endeavor of establishing relationships of causality—the endeavor of explanation. (2016, 88)

This idea of the spontaneous came up frequently in follow-up interviews. Tasked with documenting any "distractions" (undefined in the diary instructions) that arose during viewings, some respondents told me they started noticing behaviors they said they never realized they did so frequently, such as pausing to go to the bathroom, grabbing something to eat, or checking the time code on the DVD to see how much running time was left.

The mobile phone was a particularly illustrative case: some respondents told me that they would preemptively find themselves on their phones at random times for any number of reasons.

For example, in my first interview with William, he explained to me how he typically dedicated himself to keeping his phone away whenever he watched new television shows. In our second interview, he admitted to picking his phone up more often than he had expected.

> **Dan:** Is there anything you noticed that you haven't before?
>
> **William:** It made me more aware of how much I'm on my phone while I'm watching something. I'd never seen the episodes of *South Park* that I've been watching, but I would still maybe take out my phone and take a look at a couple of things while watching it and I'd be like, 'Why am I doing this?' You know. And I'd put it down then. And it wouldn't have even occurred to me before I did this thing so I was more conscious of it.
>
> **Dan:** So there were times you were on your phone where you would've just brushed it off or forgotten about it entirely.
>
> **William:** Yes, it wouldn't have been on my radar if I weren't in the study.
>
> **Dan:** Why do you think that is?
>
> **William:** Oh, it just made me think about these things. It makes me, if I'm watch a show and I grab my phone and start to do something, I'll either think, 'This is fine, because I really don't care about what I'm watching,' or I will think, 'Don't do this. Pay attention to what you're watching.' It's one way or another.

Part of William's difficulty seemed to be that his rationalizations about his phone primarily came *after* or *as* he realized he was using it—similar to Garfinkel's (1984, 114) observation that explanations tend to proceed actions rather than precede them. The phone was so ordinary that its preemptive usage could occur before the mind could fully justify or recognize it. As Kathleen Stewart (2007, 64) says, "Sometimes you have to pause to catch up with where you already are."

For the purposes of remaining attentive, this often meant that viewers maintained, at once, (1) a future-orientation of structuring their viewing environment to decrease the likelihood of distractions, along with (2) a present-orientation of responding to their own ostensibly distracting behaviors as they became aware they were already doing them. One example in a follow-up interview with cinephile Andy is suggestive. Andy reported watching the stop-motion animated

feature *Kubo and the Two Strings* (dir. Travis Knight, 2016) while simultaneously texting with a friend, until he eventually decided he needed to put the phone away. He discussed how, in spite of his desire to maintain close attention, he still "caught himself" looking at his phone for extended lengths of time.

> **Dan**: You said that you were receiving and sending texts throughout *Kubo* and you were on your phone for at least part of it, but then at a certain point you decided to put it on a Do Not Disturb mode and put it away. What was the breaking point there? Why did you decide to put it away?
>
> **Andy:** When I started receiving texts so many times I thought it was a ringtone. It was all the same person. I also think I was looking at my phone for 20 seconds and I was like, I know I'm missing too much. *Kubo* is stop-motion and you're kind of cheating yourself if you're not paying attention to every frame. So it was that kind of thing where I needed to put this down and pay more attention.
>
> **Dan:** When you were on the phone previously, because you were on the phone, did you ever pause or rewind because you missed anything?
>
> **Andy:** I don't think so. I think we only paused when we had to go to the bathroom.
>
> **Dan:** Why didn't you pause or rewind when you were on your phone?
>
> **Andy:** Eh, because I was still hearing it and even though my eyes were away, I was still paying attention to it, mostly. But that's the thing: when I'm looking at my phone for more than 20 seconds, I'm like, okay, I need to start really paying attention to this. Also the texts were starting to get annoying, too.

Andy indicated that he needed to "pay more attention," which he signaled by ending his phone conversation. At the same time, he still regarded his in-the-moment balances between the phone and the television screen as *attentive enough*, whether by noting how he was "still hearing" the movie or mentioning that pausing or rewinding were not necessary to catch up on parts of the film he had "missed too much" of.

This often flexible relationship between audience intent and reported practices—what Lynn Clark (2004) has called "media transgressions"—arose for nearly every respondent at some point or another. Most participants (including the most adamant attention advocates in my

cinephile group) said they found themselves in positions of "letting things slide" when they realized distractions were occurring, even in many instances where they believed they had the ability to stop them. For every variable that would be labeled as disruptive or undesirable to proper viewing, there was often a story where a respondent admitted to causing or amplifying that variable, or, at the very least, to not feeling compelled to stop it as it happened. Sometimes, they justified inactions by pointing to the preference they had for one form of interference over another. For example, Donna told me that her viewing of *Fatal Attraction* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987) on a particularly hot day was disturbed by the sounds of a nearby construction site through her open window. Although she briefly weighed shutting the window to mitigate the sound, she decided against it because she did not have air conditioning and closing the window "would've meant heating the room up by five degrees." Between two co-existing, ongoing distractions of heat and sound, she felt that it "wasn't worth it" to change anything. Whether explicitly deliberated or not, the process of watching often required respondents to make-do with presumably disruptive or unwanted occurrences, or, in the case of occurrences that were especially common or unnoticeable, to continue watching while only occasionally attending to the distractions that were already happening.

The process of making-do was probably most prominent in the way respondents described the two final distractors discussed in this chapter: mind wanderings and inadvertent sleeping. Here, goals of total attention sometimes ran up against the sometimes unruly instincts and sensoria of the body and mind (Sobchack 2004, 59). Several respondents had difficulty discussing the stray thoughts or momentary lapses in concentration that could arise at virtually any time over virtually any of their viewings. When I asked during their first interviews about where their "minds go" as they watch, a number of them said that they frequently found

themselves thinking about matters contrary to whatever narratively was "onscreen," though some initially explained this as a result of their imaginations free associating directly from events they had just watched. Jocelyn told me how her thoughts were sometimes out of sync with what she understood as the flow of the film, even as she was still, by her own measure, technically watching the film attentively.

> **Dan:** Do you ever find that you are missing details even if you're paying attention closely?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Oh, yeah.
>
> **Dan:** Why do you think that happens?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Because I'm thinking about something else. [laughs] Let's say, this I noticed during *Winter Sleep* [dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2014]. There's a scene that I really liked, and I liked it so much that even when the scene changed, I was thinking about the past scene and some other things it reminded me of. 'Oh, I liked that scene.' So I was just thinking about it even after they were showing something else and probably missing some stuff that happened right after.
>
> **Dan:** Do you consider that to be a distraction?
>
> **Jocelyn:** No. Well, maybe.
>
> **Dan:** Why?
>
> **Jocelyn**: I don't want to miss any of the details, but if there's a scene that I like more than the others, that's also just a part of movie watching.

Jocelyn's tendency to linger on particular textual elements and the associations they inspire has been extensively analyzed within reception studies. Roland Barthes (1981, 47–49), for one, famously wrote about the "punctum" as aspects of images that jump out at viewers and inspire (often unintended) idiosyncratic memories, connections, or other personal feelings that are difficult to pinpoint. For Barthes, it was these more unruly dimensions of reading that allowed the text to have much of its impact. In matters of reception, it is difficult to predict precisely how certain audiences will respond to details of certain texts. However, such conceptualizations seem

quite different from the way my respondents talked about the "irrelevant" features of some their mind wanderings. Stray thoughts could be conceivably inspired by or tangential to something they had just viewed (as Jocelyn testified), but just as often could be of unclear origin or seemingly unrelated to anything onscreen at all, and they might not necessarily add much to the overall impact of the work. For example, Tom regarded the peripheral or parallel thoughts that sometimes arose as he watched television shows as just another interference, albeit one that could not be easily harnessed or controlled.

> **Dan:** Does your mind ever wander?
>
> **Tom:** That happens a lot. Well, not *a lot*. But it does happen.
>
> **Dan:** What happens? Walk me through it.
>
> **Tom:** It's like, even if something else goes through my mind, I'm still paying attention to what's going on. So I just have to pull myself out and remove that thought and go back into the show. It's not like I have to pause it to think about something and then play it again.
>
> **Dan:** If your mind is wandering, do you realize it? Or do you only realize it later?
>
> **Tom:** Like, I know it's wandering, but [inaudible]. I think it's like, if I'm watching a TV show and there are three other things on my mind, that decreases the experience of the show, but I just can't do anything about it. I can't actively be like, 'Stop thinking that. Get back into it.'
>
> **Dan:** What might be on your mind?
>
> **Tom:** Some stuff I need to get done or some conversation I had. Or I'm relating something to something I heard on the TV show. Connecting the dots. But who knows?
>
> **Dan:** If your mind ever wanders, do you rewind or stop the show, or do you continue on?
>
> **Tom:** I do, but not too often.

Unlike some other interferences discussed above, which respondents could plausibly position as outside the self and capable of being physically removed from the viewing space, irrelevant thoughts were often framed as internal to the viewer and impossible to fully separate from

oneself. For Tom, this presented a slight problem, since he could not silence his extraneous thoughts the same way he could a ringing phone, especially when those thoughts pertained to other details of his lifeworld like "stuff I need to get done or some conversation I had." Indeed, many respondents claimed that "intrusive thoughts" could be more prevalent on specific days, regardless of whatever film or program they were watching, depending on work-related stresses, upcoming deadlines, interpersonal conflicts, or current events.[10] At the same time, mind wanderings could also arise about any number of subjects at any given time.

Like Tom, James also admitted to these seemingly-arbitrary thought patterns, and he also mentioned that he did not always use their occurrence as reason for rewinding if he "missed" anything onscreen.

> **Dan:** Does your mind ever wander while watching movies?
>
> **James:** Oh yeah.
>
> **Dan:** Frequently? Occasionally?
>
> **James:** I don't have the greatest attention, to be honest. I really try to focus as much as I can, but my mind will wander.
>
> **Dan:** Do you think that paying full attention to a film means your mind will never wander? Or is it acceptable?
>
> **James:** I think it's acceptable because it's like, you can't always control your mind wandering. Your mind's gonna wander. I mean, my mind has wandered in here! [laughs] I've already thought about 'OK, do I have to fill my car up with gas?' I've thought about things not pertinent to this conversation.
>
> **Dan:** [laughs] So, if you ever do that, do you find yourself in situations where you've missed a particular scene or line of dialogue or something?
>
> **James:** Sure.

[10] Joan Hawkins (2000, 228n18) tells an anecdote of a friend attending an Elvis Presley movie the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated and hearing weeping throughout the theater: "The sobbing clearly had nothing to do with the film. If any people were distracted viewers, glancing at the screen from time to time instead of gazing at it in rapt attention, these spectators-in-shock-and-mourning were."

Dan: Would you rewind at that point?

James: If possible. I'll usually let it play. My mind usually doesn't wander *that* much to the point where I'm missing major plot points or anything.

James regarded his wanderings as small blips in focus that did not necessarily affect his overall ability to pay attention. In this way, his viewing, even when otherwise continuous, could nonetheless contain moments of not- or barely-watching—gazing ahead but not always processing what was happening. Emily Martin (2007, 7–8) has noted the presence of "the irrational" in normal activities, as many people experience fleeting "disassociation, free association, flight of ideas, emotional tempests or voids, and so on" that do not usually interfere drastically with their daily life and which "would not be grounds for a diagnosis of serious psychological illness." In terms of viewing attention, this banal coexistence of not-watching within watching effectively meant that most respondents did not feel a need to pause or rewind whenever wanderings occurred (if such wanderings were even acknowledged at all). As Catherine argued to me, sometimes one just needs to be in a "good head space" to watch a movie, and if you weren't, you just have to take periodic bouts of trailing off "as it is."

Making-do with internal lapses was even more complicated when it came to the issue of falling asleep. Film theorists have sometimes analyzed sleeping as a cinematic effect; John Ellis (1992, 40), for instance, argued that since "sitting still in the dark has overtones of sleep and dreaming," falling asleep can be a literal consequence of "submitting" oneself to the power of the screen. Contrary to Ellis's claims, some of my respondents grappled with sleepiness more as a liminal state of sometimes unclear causality—one that hovered "somewhere between the voluntary and the involuntary, the purposive and the non-purposive" (Williams 2007, 314). Unlike mind wandering, which some respondents described as momentary or minor enough that full attention was not ruined, falling asleep could be an involuntary accident that made it hard to

claim one had meaningfully watched the film or show at all. As such, sleep was a domain of more pronounced frustration and purposeful avoidance, though respondents still routinely found themselves falling into sleepy states despite their best intents—especially if they were watching late at night or "already feeling tired."

Many of the inadvertent sleep stories I heard had elements of failed determination, as respondents reported trying to push through a particular screening even as they started to feel themselves drifting off. Lucy described her attempts to watch *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968) in this way.

> **Dan**: Do you ever fall asleep while watching movies?
>
> **Lucy**: I typically won't start a new movie if I'm tired. I have fallen asleep in *2001: A Space Odyssey* two times, but it's typically because we're starting the movie at, like, 12:30 and it's a three-hour-long movie. I know the signs of I know I'm going to fall asleep during this movie.
>
> **Dan:** What are some of the signs?
>
> **Lucy:** If I start getting comfortable on the couch. Or like lying down. 'Yeah, I'm just laying here watching it, but I'm getting really tired…' Close my eyes for a second, suddenly movie's over.
>
> **Dan:** How do you feel about that?
>
> **Lucy:** It's annoying! Because then I have to rewatch the movie. I already tried twice, both times unsuccessful, and I still have to watch *2001*.
>
> **Dan:** If you sleep, are you completely out or do you just nod in and out?
>
> **Lucy:** Typically if I do fall asleep, I'm just out until someone wakes me up.
>
> **Dan:** Would you rewind to…?
>
> **Lucy:** If I started the movie again. For that particular movie, I started it from the beginning again. Because I wanted to see the whole thing. But I fell asleep at the same time. [laughs]

As Lucy's repeated watching attempts suggest, sleep was something she could never fully

control, even as said she recognized the signs that she was beginning to lose control. Indeed, her only choice for mitigating the interference of sleep seemed to be to not watch at all or try again another time.

The question of choice was further complicated by a similar story that Jocelyn told me about how posture contributed to her ability to fight sleep. She explained to me in her first interview how she disliked sitting on her couch for long periods of time "because it's hard to sit straight for a long time." However, as she would start sliding into a horizontal position to feel more comfortable, she also opened herself to greater chance of getting drowsy. This would happen regardless of how much she was enjoying the movie. In her second interview, she talked about a failed attempt she had had at watching *Song of the Sea* (dir. Tomm Moore, 2014).

> **Dan:** You wrote that with *Song of the Sea* you noticed yourself getting drowsy, and you didn't stop the movie. Did you think you could just keep going through?
>
> **Jocelyn:** With *Song of the Sea,* I knew that I was going to be falling asleep soon, but I really wanted to finish it, so I think I took my laptop to bed and I only had 10 or 15 minutes left, so I thought that I'd be able to make it.
>
> **Dan:** But you didn't.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Nope. 'Okay, 10 minutes! I think I can try!' But then I just fell asleep immediately.
>
> **Dan:** Do you think that's at all the movie's fault?
>
> **Jocelyn:** No. At that point it wasn't. I was just too tired to finish it and I needed to lie down. I think that would've happened with any other movie.

In cases like this, respondents seemed to regard sleep as an interference primarily by how incidental it felt to the "actual" text they were watching. Donna, for example, regarded her failed four attempts to wakefully watch (ironically) *The Big Sleep* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1946) as a simple unplanned occurrence of life: "It just happened. It's never intentional, which really sucks."

Sleep is just one example of how daunting it was for many respondents to separate their

own viewing bodies and consciousness from other rhythms and currents of life. The urge to close one's eyes, to go to the bathroom, to eat, to unthinkingly glance toward the phone screen, to mentally dawdle on random ideas—all of these were likely embedded within, though never fully determined by, ongoing social, economic, and environmental formations that guided individuals to labor, consume, play, and rest at particular hours with particular intensities and particular variations. To take just one humble example: any instance of sleepiness is its own singularity, situated among countless interlocking determinants, including circadian rhythms, room climate, work schedules, dietary or prescription regimens, the amount of sleep one has caught the previous day (or the day before that, or the day before that…), neighborhood noise levels (and with that, the viewer's racial and class situatedness within the geography of the town), and individual disorders (insomnia, hypersomnia, etc.), to name but a few (Hassoun and Gilmore 2017; Wolf-Meyer 2012).

This is too much to account for in any one analysis or anecdote. In a practical sense, it sometimes seems like when not much is going on, "there is already too much to know where to begin" (Highmore 2011, 3). Within everyday life, the complexity of interferences was most powerfully and comprehensibly understood as stuff that seemed to "just happen." This ability of internal distractors to simply "happen" functioned as the most plausible, go-to explanation for their existence, and as the source of their annoyingness or mystery. Dailiness was ultimately framed as lots of things that seemed to haphazardly occur, which at once lent the everyday its straightforward feeling, while at the same guaranteeing its frequent disappointment. As Kathleen Stewart (2007, 29) writes, "The ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape-shifting forms of violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost or found. Or it falters, fails. But either way we feel

its pull."

Conclusion: When Things Happen

This chapter has considered discourses and practices of screen attention that understand distractions as intrusive or uninvited presences within spectatorship. Despite the stated desire of some respondents to consecrate or separate viewing from the presence of interruptions—to "just watch" whatever it is they want to watch—it was difficult for them to conceive of exactly what pure viewership outside of "other sensorial means of access to the world" even looked like (Sobchack 2004, 59). Ultimately, the existence of the unplanned, the irritating, and the diversionary linked the process of watching to other "irrelevant," backgrounded, or parallel domains of everyday life—a whole compendium of things happening around us all the time, some of which are ignored and others of which cannot be. In their second interviews, a number of respondents voiced their bemusement that their study involvement was "making them notice" more distractions everywhere that they had not always picked up on (in effect, pointing toward how any audience study shapes the responses of its participants to some degree). A few joked that the effort of trying to monitor and document their own attention was itself becoming a source of distraction. Others, like Harry in the cinephile group, even took this expanded awareness as a challenge to make his home viewing more attentive.

> **Harry:** If anything, this made me be more attentive.
>
> **Dan:** What do you mean?
>
> **Harry:** Like, you start thinking of distractions and all of a sudden it's like, 'Oh, wow, all of these things are distractions.'
>
> **Dan:** Are there things that stood out to you as distractions now that wouldn't have before you did the diary?

Harry: Many of them were 'a car drove by' kind of deals. With the study, I had to remember them, but I would have noticed them regardless.

Dan: So when the diary asked if any distractions happened, you saw that as you needing to note if a car drove by?

Harry: Yeah! It was a distraction!

Dan: Would that have stuck out to you as a distraction otherwise?

Harry: Yeah.

Dan: Would you have remembered it?

Harry: Probably not, but it would still have been a distraction.

According to Harry, the study had turned him on to distractions already resting within his space lying in wait to be uncovered and remembered as such. For him, this was part and parcel of further refining his focus to accord with goals of total attention. This view of attentional improvement echoes Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 58) understanding of "flow," where optimized attention requires identifying and removing intrusions that "prey" on our thoughts and ability to become invested in something. As a discourse framing home viewing as a project for continual improvement and distraction-mitigation, it also links with trends in home cinema and domestic theatricalization discussed above. Here, everyday life exists as an impediment for the individual to overcome; the distractions that redirect our mental energies must be minimized in order to achieve "optimal inner experience" (6, 33).

The problem with these goals of attention maximization—and an under-acknowledged reality within most of the writing on distraction in film and television studies—is that the viewing environments where "too much" was happening are often, not coincidentally, sites where "nothing much" is happening as well. A notable counterpoint to Harry would be Shelly, who noted in her second interview that whenever distractions were happening in the moment,

they didn't necessarily feel like interferences per se: "they were just happening," and she often needed to apply the label of "disruption" to them after the fact. Distractions were not always self-evident: calling an occurrence out as such involved positioning it along a constantly-evolving scale between "unnoticed disruption," "acceptable disruption," and "catastrophic disruption."

This presented a conceptual challenge to some of the cinephiles I interviewed, who seemed unsure if "100 percent attention" or comprehensive viewing was ever truly possible. Gordon was one of my most skeptical respondents, arguing that the multitude of things entering into our consciousness meant any attempt at single-tasking was going to involve some disruption.

> **Dan:** Is it possible to give 100 percent even just to one thing at a time?
>
> **Gordon:** [long pause] No.
>
> **Dan:** Do you think to an extent, then, that you're always sort of multitasking?
>
> **Gordon:** By definition. [chuckles] But unless we're just a brain in a vat. Unless we're like in *A Clockwork Orange* [dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971] with someone putting the eye drops in so we don't miss a second.
>
> **Dan:** So short of that, you're not positive whether you can be 100 percent attentive?
>
> **Gordon:** No. There are always going to be so many different aspects that go into a person's life. Your consciousness is always going to be at work.

More of my respondents tried to find some middle ground, claiming that although full attention may be impossible, they still could retain some control over its likelihood.

> **Ben:** It's a matter of your own will power, but there is some percentage of things, maybe 60/40, things that are just extremely hard to not be distracted by.
>
> **Dan:** So 60 percent is your own will power, 40 percent is stuff you can't control for.
>
> **Ben:** Right.
>
> **Dan:** Are there ways of minimizing that 40 percent?
>
> **Ben:** I think so.

> **Dan:** So if those things still happen, is it still your responsibility?
>
> **Ben:** Um…I would say that they're out of my control after that point. After I've prepared and tried to create a setting that has the least amount of distraction possible, all I can really do is sit and hope that it remains that way. So some of it is out of your control and it's not really your fault.

No matter the controls or intentions in place, it was ultimately "out of the control" of Gordon and Ben what would happen as they moved through their practices of watching from moment to moment. There were simply too many factors, too many contingencies, to ever confidently state that something unplanned *wouldn't* happen. This was not always seen as the fault of any specific entity; it was taken as a basic fact of actualizing attention in daily life.

Cinema and media studies has produced a rich body of work on domestic theatricalization and the various sanctions, controls, and conditions that people place on particular instances of spectatorship. In doing so, however, it has risked ignoring the "40 percent" of the viewing context (as Ben perhaps conservatively put it) that makes it impossible to prevent interferences from potentially occurring. Perhaps instead of theorizing about the relative "attention" or "distraction" of specific technologies, practices, or spaces as if they were clear states, it would be better to speak of various *efforts at* attention. These efforts are themselves flexible and adapted to moment-by-moment perceptions, and vulnerable to the accidental, the incidental, and the unwanted, even if they sometimes give off the appearance of being successful or solid (such as the commonly-circulated image of attentively sitting in a movie theater).

Such a focus allows us to approach the radical contingency that underlines ordinary viewing. This is an ordinariness that is not specifically or solely attached to particular viewing places (contra the arguments of Ellis and others that position the home as a special site of unruliness). If my respondents' shifting understandings of interference suggested anything, it was a certain discomfort or frustration with the uncertainties and possibilities arising not from

the home *specifically* (even as certain disruptions may be more likely to occur there), but rather from the unfolding of life itself. It is difficult to ever remove viewing from the manifold experiences of everyday life. In idealizing (or even conceptualizing the existence of) certain types of total attention, cinephiles, critics, and scholars alike do boundary work of trying to demarcate lines of acceptability around an ever-changing goalpost that one may never be able to consistently achieve. In this way, the myth of total concentration (cinematic or otherwise) has some possible corollaries with the spirit of Andre Bazin's (2005, 21) "myth of total cinema": the medium (or, in this case, our embodied experiences with the medium) can never satisfy all the idealizations to which we hold it, but that does not prevent many people from desiring to have them.

This is not to suggest that our main takeaway should just be that attentiveness is simply some impossible Platonic ideal we are unable (or unworthy?) of realizing. Jonathan Crary (1999, 4) notes that attention has long been framed as incomplete and provisional ever since its modern discourses arose in the late nineteenth century; it was precisely this never-enough quality that made attentiveness such a fertile site for management and disciplinary projects (see also Citton 2017, 36). As the psychologist Theodule Ribot argued as early as 1888, "[Attention] is an exceptional, anomalous state, which cannot last long because it contradicts the fundamental condition of psychic life: change" (quoted in Citton 2017, 182–183). In this way, efforts at attention speak to a certain partiality in our attempts to make life predictable or live with its many "vicissitudes and imperfections" (Maffesoli 2004, 206), or, as Goffman (1981, 195) phrased it, to grapple with the "flickering, cross-purposed, messy irresolution of our unknowable circumstances." When it comes to attention, we live not in the world of deficiency, but of multiplicity. As spectatorial attention moves between the known and unknown, the irritating and

the tolerated, the planned and the spontaneous, it is clear that both everything and nothing always seems to be occurring. As Maggie Jackson (2008, 262) put it, “Attention is like a second skin, a meeting ground for our ever-present grappling with external and internal worlds.” It is on this meeting ground that durability and interference—the tension between “nothing happening” and “something happening”—continue to intermingle and unfold into new occurrences.

Chapter 2

(Dis)Attending the Familiar: Expectation, Boredom, and Rewatching

Gordon explained to me what it meant for someone to be attentive to a piece of media.

> **Dan:** What needs to be in place for someone to be considered an attentive viewer?
>
> **Gordon** I think to be attentive you can't be distracted by anything. You can't really multitask and get 100 percent attention to two things, more than two things.
>
> **Dan**: How do you define attention?
>
> **Gordon:** I mean, now you're kind of making me rethink that. I think attentive might be devotion, like solely committing yourself to one thing. So it's possible that me noticing other things is me not being attentive, but maybe I'll still be, like, really committed to watching something or whatever.

Like many other respondents, Gordon seemed to have difficulty deciding where to place definitional emphasis: was attentiveness a result of a *lack* of distractions or was it a signal of heightened awareness to the television screen relative to other activities going on? In Gordon's explanation, he could conceivably be distracted (in the sense of noticing or doing other things around him) while still remaining resolute in his interest to whatever was on the TV. The "other things" were just so familiar that they did not necessarily constitute real distractions.

Accounting for this parallel construction of attentiveness—treating attention as a force of selective awareness toward something—involves slightly different understandings of everyday life than those suggested in Chapter 1's focus on instability and contingency. While the everyday could on one hand be a domain of unwanted or unpredictable intrusions challenging attention (from which proper viewing had to be isolated and protected), it could also a site of tiered focus among multiple activities at once. Under this logic, attention was a way of signaling one's prioritization of particular practices in relation to others. Oftentimes, these activities (including the process of watching itself) were highly routinized, and shifting attention between them

involved a person's interests, expectations, and comforts toward the minutiae of each one. Understanding these judgments requires that we grapple with how people come to develop senses of familiarity and disregard toward the specifics of daily life, up to and including the smallest details of the media texts they encounter.

Jonathan Gray (2003, 65) notes that, as much as some media executives might love for all audiences to be fans, the reality is that everyone has different blends of engagement or non-engagement with certain texts: "When one's relationship to the text is no longer one of close affect…the very nature and structure of that text changes." For this reason, Gray argues that issues of textuality cannot be ignored in studies about how television (and other media) fit into various household flows (76). The features of what is literally playing on a screen are not merely incidental. Rather, specific texts—and viewers' responses, attachments, or non-attachments to them—were a commonly-cited factor in my interviews about how much attention should be "given" at certain times to certain kinds of media. Or, more accurately, respondents' *expectations* about specific texts—drawn from textual conventions, personal histories, and other factors—allowed them to explain how they would form certain attention strategies for particular films and television shows, but not for others.

Such explanations were not always consistent or stable, however. Respondents' acquaintance or comfort with certain texts could function as a reason for intensified attention toward them, as well as a justification for *not* paying attention. This made processes of giving attention difficult to square with some understandings of interest and attachment—where people frequently assumed it was natural to pay more attention to texts they enjoyed and less attention to texts they did not. Oftentimes, respondents struggled to explain why (by their own standards) they were at their most distracted while watching things about which they cared the most. In

many ways, this problem related to people's tendencies to regard media spectatorship itself as an ordinary, everyday activity. That is, rather than an activity that always deserved sacralization, the basic procedures of watching could be repetitive and known, a "daily dance" between the new and the all-too-familiar (Klinger 2006, 155). And familiarity might breed neglect. In this chapter, I contend that logics about these relationships among attention, distraction, textuality, and expectation reproduce larger tensions in how people deal with issues of familiarity in everyday life. Analyzing these relationships suggests that people have much more pliable and continuously-shifting viewing styles toward certain texts than is often acknowledged by film and media scholarship.

I begin by discussing key debates in the construction of the familiar, particularly how experiences that are marked as repetitive and habitual provide both a crucial anchoring for affective life *and* a reason to disregard or take-for-granted that life. I proceed to analyze how issues of familiarity appeared in respondents' justifications for their film and television attention, specifically with regard to notions of genre and quality (which tie particular attentional styles to particular groups of texts) and notions of interest and boredom (which tie attention to ideas of personal attachment or obligatory completion of certain texts). In the final section, I bring these understandings to bear on one case study—media rewatching—as an illustration of how audiences may regard film and television attention as both a willful attachment and a more ambient and potentially disregardable feature of daily life. This relationship between attention and disregard challenges some bedrock assumptions of studies of cinephilia and fans, which often imply that repetition, attachment, and elevated, sacralized, or focused attention necessarily go hand in hand. Many accounts of audiences have tended to rely on binaristic understandings of attachment or non-attachment (for example, absorbed *or* bored, analytical *or* inattentive, fans *or*

non-fans). Such arguments are often useful for counteracting stereotypes of audiences as passive or unthinking in their daily routines, but they often lose a crucial ambiguity in how routines are actually navigated or ambiguously lived-though. In contrast to these accounts, I conclude by arguing for a view of media attention as "bendable"—fluctuating around multiple poles of engagement, half-engagement, and disengagement toward multiple activities, often during a single text or with the same text over multiple viewings at different times.

Familiarity as Comfort and/or Distraction

In the conclusion of Chapter 1, I discussed how many respondents, in their viewing diaries, had difficulty noticing distractions and disruptors as they occurred, so normal were they to their daily viewing life. This subtle disregard could apply not only to interferences (framed as things *outside* the screen), but also to the entire situation of watching itself. One respondent, Shelly, told me that she expected she would be "more self-conscious" about her practices of attention given her involvement in the study, but instead found some difficulty even remembering the study once she turned her shows on ("I guess I'm really good at forgetting things," she reasoned). Another respondent, Larry, apologized to me in his follow-up interview for providing too many "dull answers." While he had expected to be self-conscious about his attention while watching television, in reality he often started falling into an unreflective routine and did not think he had much to say about it. As he put it, "I hoped I would learn something about myself or something, but as soon as I turned the show on, I was just watching the show."

Shelly and Larry's difficulties in maintaining (in their conceptions) a self-critical distance from their own viewership are not unique: they speak to a deeper problematic in how we frame our relationships to the most habitual and unremarkable aspects of daily life. Even if, as the

previous chapter suggested, the world may be in constant, unpredictable motion around us, it nonetheless often gives off the practical feeling of being solid, still, and, even if not always comforting or safe, at least familiar. The familiar imbues the things we see and do with an air of expectation; we are not in full awareness or control of surrounding structures or ideologies, but their day-in, day-out feeling nevertheless provides them with a habitable, full, and immediate quality that feels self-evident and hardly worthy of explanation or analysis (Stewart 2007, 15; Williams 1977, 129). As Henri Lefebvre (1984, 24) suggests, the quotidian is a very humble place, not in spite of but because of its feeling of solidness.

Much of the scholarly work on everyday life has attempted to grapple with the function and importance of this habitability within the familiar. Put simply, we not only experience the everyday but also inhabit and feel some degree of fluency with it. For Harold Garfinkel (1984), the importance of the sociology of daily life rests upon how people use rules to make their way through their days and reproduce systems of generalized trust: we expect that the outcomes of our actions will be fairly predictable and that other people, institutions, and technologies around us will act predictably in turn. The overall trustworthiness (or *desire* for trustworthiness) in daily life is at the heart of what many writers have argued is experientially and ontologically important about it. Rather than being "entirely determined by the contingencies of context," everyday life can instead feel rhythmic and, to a certain degree, dependable (Highmore 2004, 307). Indeed, this sense of a common ground for the operations of life—an ability to take things for granted—is a position of privilege that those lacking a consistently stable economic or identity base often desire (Cavalcante 2018, 147).

Much of the work in the phenomenology of everyday life has grappled with these questions about dependability and desired stability. In one of the most important accounts about

familiarity regarding practices of television, Roger Silverstone (1994, 20) argues that broadcast schedules help to reproduce and define temporalities within the household (which itself reproduce the scheduling of labor and recreation in the larger society). Television could be taken for granted because of how effectively it fit into the seriality of daily life; its physical presence and its programming always appeared to just *be there* as constant companions, something to regard both consciously and unconsciously from hour to hour. Television's durability helps sustain what Silverstone (borrowing from Anthony Giddens) calls an "ontological security" to the everyday, a sense of confidence or trust in the world as it appears to be, "without which life would quickly become intolerable" (1994, 19; see also Ling 2012; Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 19). Without an ability to relax their attention to most of the day's comings and goings, people risk feeling stuck without foundation, unable to engage other matters or daydreams (Highmore 2004, 309). For this reason, Paddy Scannell (1996, 149) argues that routine is central for our days to maintain a basic feeling of fullness and (paradoxically) idiosyncrasy: through the assemblage of repeated actions and objects, it seems like "today is *this* day in particular because *this* is happening. Today is not empty. It is full of matter and concerns." As Ted Striphas writes:

> The everyday is what can be counted on, and as such its consequentiality can easily be overlooked or even forgotten. It's kind of like trusted friends, who are there for us day in and day out. It's as though they've always been a part of our lives, and the meaningfulness and stability they provide may not fully register until they're gone. (2009, 10)

Here, the sense of familiarity is part of what bestows everydayness with its sense of purpose, richness, and legibility, even if we do not always realize it.

This ability to "not realize" or "not fully register" the familiar makes it a tricky phenomenon to discus vis-à-vis issues of attention and distraction. Raymond Williams (1977,

132) famously argues in his discussion of "structures of feeling" that our senses of inhabitation and continuity in the world are not simply states we adopt, but rather depend on practices that we "do" over and over again. Rita Felski (1999/2000, 31) similarly notes how these repeated practices gradually acclimatize us to bend our focus and energies toward certain aspects of the surrounding world while tuning others out: "Certain tasks which at first appear awkward or strange—driving is an obvious example—gradually become second nature to us over time." [1] The repetition of actions and senses allows us (to some extent) to master and automatize our tendencies into routines; for this reason, Walter Benjamin (1999, 592) claimed that "the furthest development of attention, but also its end" is habit.

Habituation involves a paradox, however: the more familiar or reflexive something becomes, the more it may be discursively framed as experienced in states of distraction or disregard. Michael Taussig (1991, 148) has referred to the "automatic knowledge" of distraction in this way, recounting how people who live in a city rarely "see" the most notable surrounding architecture that otherwise stands out to a newcomer or tourist. Or, returning to Felski's example of driving above, we can see that the more acclimated someone becomes to operating a vehicle along the same roads each day, the more prone they are to conducting most details of their drive with varying degrees of inattention or combination with other tasks (Laurier 2002, 2004). Distraction, in other words, may not be the opposite of attention, but rather an inevitable, perhaps necessary, outgrowth of its prolonged attachment to or experience with a particular thing.

For many historians and scholars of film and television, it is precisely the comfort that audiences feel about dis-attending a particular medium that marks that medium's blending into

[1] Cognitive psychologists have also analyzed this tendency to background most details of everyday life, but within an explanatory framework based on individual cognition. Here, the brain preserves a finite amount of mental resources at its disposal and works to tune out or "bottleneck" (especially very familiar) details of the world to prevent subjects from being overwhelmed by sensory inputs (Broadbent 1987; Carr 2010, 21–28; LaRose 2010, 195).

the rhythms of everyday life. Once people grow used to new media, their behavior is often most notable for their looser protocols of attention (Butsch 2000, 9). Even as discourses circulate, in turn, about the spectacular or pernicious qualities of certain media, in reality these media are "invisible" or only intermittently attention-grabbing to most people most of the time (Corbett 2001, 28; Galloway 2004). Audiences' shifting degrees of familiarity with film and television technologies have historically challenged widely-held assumptions about the attentiveness of cinema versus the distractedness of television. For example, historians associated with the "new cinema history" movement have chronicled how early theatergoing routines began interweaving with elements of social life "associated with but not reducible to" the act of watching films (Allen 2014, 33; see also Allen 2006; Van de Vijver and Biltereyst 2013). As moviegoing became more ritualized in the U.S., it also made movies themselves seem relatively banal—texts whose details could often be half- or mis-remembered in attendance patterns that could mostly be a pretext for dating, hanging with friends, or simply wasting time. Similarly, television historians have noted how, although TV in the 1940s was discursively promoted as something "requiring complete and unfaltering attention" (Boddy 1985, 131), the norms for engagement loosened considerably to include other possible activities as it became a familiar household presence (Butsch 2000, 243).[2] Paradoxically, the more repetitive the experience with any medium, the greater the range of peripheral activities that may happen around and with it.

Scholars have had a difficult time evaluating this tendency for greater habituation to lead to wider variations in practices. Historically, numerous fields in the humanities have associated comfort or predictability with greater complacency or loss of perceptual faculty (Highmore 2011, 167–171). These perspectives sometimes treat repetitive practices as straitjackets "foisted on us"

[2] As I will discuss in Chapter 3, this discursive widening of possible TV viewing modes also helped to reinforce the gendered division of duties in the home, as women were granted some allowance to conduct household labor while the television was on.

that we are condemned to live within (even if they remain ontologically important in certain ways) (Highmore 2004, 307). Routine rhetorically stands as something to "escape from" (Cohen and Taylor 1976) or as something in need of constant reinvention to avoid "deathly" stasis (Guattari 2008, 27). The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (2006, 778–779) articulated one forceful version of this argument, contending that life lived under the unconscious automatism of habit was a life of "nothing," a shell where we think we know about the things in front of us, but "we cannot say anything significant about it." Against this stultification, Shklovsky saw art as a way to reintroduce sensation to the everyday and de-familiarize the most self-evident and "known" objects—"to make the stone *stony* again" (778, original emphasis).[3]

This spirit of distrust toward familiarity and appraisal of reinvention also guides many Marxist and materialist arguments about everyday life, albeit without most of Shklovsky's highbrow aesthetic ambitions. This work tends to couch a distrust of repetition within a larger critique of life inside mass consumer societies, where people's lives are steered by bureaucracies and forces beyond their immediate influence (Lefebvre 1984, 38), where reproductions of mass media formulas condition people to accept or ignore social injustice (Debord 1995; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), or where life feels empty due to work and leisure routines that seem to go nowhere (Goodstein 2005, 18). Within these lines of argumentation, repetition and familiarity can only be defended insofar as they resist or challenge these structures. For example, Siegfried Kracauer (2002) saw the experiences of people feeling bored ("distracted") by repetitive commodities as a form of critical refusal to be hailed into consumer society. Lefebvre (1984, 77) himself treated everyday life as a place where revolutionary energies foment (even as it also was

[3] Shklovsky's call for de-familiarization preceded other intellectual and artistic movements throughout the twentieth century that similarly called for techniques to distance subjects from the supposed blindness of everyday perception. For example, Gardiner (2000) and Levin (2002) chronicle movements in France like the Surrealists and the Situationists that assigned revolutionary political possibility to the project of making the familiar unfamiliar under oppressive bourgeois or consumer capitalist structures.

a symptom of the failure of real revolutions to materialize). In a series of arguments that have found substantial uptake in film and media studies, Michel De Certeau (1984) contended that, even within the most automatized of daily structures, the practices of people making their way still permit liveliness, improvisation, and play. De Certeau's version of everyday life suggests that complete predictability is impossible given the "plurality and creativity" of practices, both among different people but also within shifting instantiations of a practice for any single person (after all, nobody ever does the same thing in exactly the same way twice) (De Certeau, 30; see also Deleuze 1994, 5). In this way, the artfulness of the familiar lies in the fact that it is never fully repetitive.

I point to these critical arguments to acknowledge an important degree of distrust that runs through discussions of familiarity and repetition: defenses of the familiar risk seeming like defenses of the status quo and the tendency of people to accept inequality and injustice in their lives. I do not wish to discount the importance of these arguments, but I do contend that they sometimes loses sight of the kinds of affective work that forces of repetition can enable for the people who live within and through them (see Williams 1977). In her wide-ranging critique of different theories of the everyday, Felski notes how the distrust of repetition seen in the work of theorists like Lefebvre and the impulse to defend dailiness as not-*truly*-repetitive in the work of De Certeau are themselves relatively modern phenomena. For much of Western history (to say nothing of many non-Western perspectives), activities gained their value because they repeated what came before, not because they necessarily progressed forward or created new ways of being (1999/2000, 20). Seeing change, variability, and transformation as more agential or revolutionary is an arguably masculinist way of reading the ordinary, since doing so tends to discredit the kinds of cyclical or grounded experiences of life that are often coded as more feminine in the West

(especially those linked to the home) (Felski, 19). Rather than things that need to be in some way overcome, I echo Felski's argument that the familiar and the habitual should be recognized for their ability to potentially "strengthen, comfort, and provide meaning," much like the phenomenologists contended (Felski, 28). Indeed, we can never hope to transcend at least some aspects of the generic, since "lived processes of routinization" are things that most individuals experience to greater or lesser degrees at different points of their lives (Felski, 31). At the same time, it is important to note how people may adopt attitudes of boredom or disinterest in the familiar, even as they rely on it for some degree of comfort: "Our bodies go through the motions while our minds are elsewhere" (Felski, 26). I find that a central difficulty in discussing familiarity lies in this *both/and* element to evaluating what expectation and routinization ultimately mean for many people, be they critics or lay people. Familiarity often provides a desired grounding for life, even as people feel many elements of it as restless, restraining, or trite in some way.

For the purposes of this study, the qualified comforts linked to the concept of "familiarity" mean that respondents might, in the same breath, embrace media practices for their known comforts or expected norms of engagement *and* disregard them as trivial or banal for precisely the same reasons. This makes it especially difficult to determine what someone means when they refer to their viewing attitudes toward a familiar medium as "distracted." For example, most of my respondents initially testified to regularly regarding television programs distractedly (whether through appointment viewing or on-demand streaming). Oftentimes, this seemed to be a popular way of referring to a range of other activities and tasks that they did as programs ran—from cooking to laundry-folding to puzzle solving to mobile device use. At face value, this would appear to support claims about the categorical inattentiveness and disposability of most

television reception, which have held that TV viewing cannot help but be "messy" because of all the other domestic activities that surround it (Giles 1985, 12).

Upon closer consideration, however, the attentional status of television was not always easy to discern vis-à-vis the familiarity respondents brought to their other activities, many of which were also regarded as rote or not requiring much concentration or effort. For instance, Richard reasoned that the on-and-off focus he gave his television was still evidence of his relative attentiveness to it, because the other tasks he conducted while it was on did not involve "all that much thought": "You can still divert your eyes for fifteen, twenty seconds [from the TV] and still be totally in…If you were doing that through the full thing, it might be different, but some breaks or other stuff here and there are okay." Mike held a similar position. As someone who routinely left on a television stream all day as he worked on other projects alongside his roommates, Mike toggled between framing the TV as backgrounded "white noise" and as a primary point of interest depending on what else he was doing.

> **Mike:** On weekends, if we have little projects like painting or sewing or drawing, we'll have those on as we watch things. It's white noise.
>
> **Dan:** What level of attention do you pay to something in order to call it white noise? Is there still a threshold of attention you need to pay to it?
>
> **Mike:** I think with white noise, at least with me, I'm not always even in the room when it's on. It's more filtering out the silence so I don't feel as alone. But if it's completely white noise, where I don't even realize if it's on or not, it's usually when I'm in the kitchen cooking. I'll then come back to the living room to actually sit down and watch it. When I'm doing an activity and the TV is on, I usually have a fair amount of attention while I'm watching it because you do a little bit while you're painting and then you look up again to see what's going on. Or you hear something that sounds exciting and it piques your interest and you watch it for a little bit. So I guess when I'm actually in the room with the TV, I do pay a fair amount of attention. It's not just pure white noise.
>
> **Dan:** Would you define yourself in those situations as attentive?
>
> **Mike:** Yes, but not completely, just because I'm splitting my attention a little.

In a follow-up interview, Madeline echoed this sentiment when I asked her about a diary entry where she reported doing household chores while watching some shows.

> **Dan:** There were a number of days when you were watching while working on other things—whether cooking or folding laundry or…
>
> **Madeline:** Yeah. That stuff doesn't take up a lot of brain power, though. I know how to fold clothes. I don't have to think about how I'm folding the clothes.
>
> **Dan:** So you'd say you're being attentive?
>
> **Madeline:** Yeah. I can't watch while studying or doing homework.
>
> **Dan:** So there are certain things you can't do at the same time.
>
> **Madeline:** Right, unless it's something I've seen before.

Across these accounts, "attentiveness" seems to serve as a marker of engagement in relation to an ever-fluctuating series of other familiar actions like cooking or laundry folding (stuff that "doesn't take up a lot of brain power"). The ordinariness of television relative to these actions meant that it could be readily mixed with them, drifting in and out of eyeshot and earshot as the eyes and ears worked elsewhere, or tuned out entirely for durations of time, before potentially snapping back into main focus. Here, the entertainment screen (as well as any other household activity) neither demanded total immersion nor did it incur complete disregard, floating instead in a continuous, shifting plane between the marked and the unmarked (Silverstone 1994, 168). This would support much of the work on home viewing over the past three decades, which has argued that televisions and other screens, at once: (1) occupy a central node of attention in the room while they are on, even as (2) they fit into and around other factors that "can be as important as, if not more important than" them (Gauntlett and Hill 1999, 21; see also Ang 1992; Lull 1990; Tichi 1991; Tutt 2008; Wilson 2016). This point bears emphasis: in terms of its attentional boundary-keeping, the TV could, at any point, be regarded as just as important *and*

just as unimportant as anything else going on. In other words, respondents felt plausibly attentive to it, but that didn't necessarily mean they thought they had to *attend* solely to it.

However, in explaining when and why they attended to the screen, my respondents' accounts often had less to do with general opinions about the deserved attentiveness of certain media (for example, talking about television as something to casually attend in relation to other activities). Instead, justifications of attention concerned the ebbs and flows in one's expectations and attitudes toward whatever was on the screen at any given moment (for example, being "interested" in it, feeling it "deserved" their attention, having "seen it before," and so on). Matt Briggs (2006, 442) notes how studies of home media consumption risk an overly insular perspective if they focus entirely on the domestic arrangements around the screen while ignoring the role of the texts *on* the screen in generating those arrangements. Form, or how that form is "popularly conceived" shapes consumption in significant ways (Aveyard 2016, 142; Jenner 2017, 266). Indeed, this is something most audiences would likely attest to as obvious: not every text is attended to in the same way. Certain programs are marked as more deserving or demanding than others, and the viewer may adjust other patterns of their day to provide more attention to them (or, as the discussion of interferences in Chapter 1 suggests, they may *attempt* to provide more attention to them) (Silverstone 1994, 21). Unpacking this tendency requires that we consider the often confusing web of relationships among distraction, familiarity, and modes of textuality—where expectancy can be used to justify the activation of attention at certain moments (even if casual or reflexive) just as much as it can spur its slippage.

Before proceeding to how respondents discussed these textual factors, two points are worth noting. First, discussions about attention levels often carried clear aural as well as visual valences. It often seemed like respondents regarded only listening to movies and shows as a

lower order of attention than visually looking at them. At the same time, listening could not be entirely disregarded as a domain for attentiveness. Some respondents could refer to the fact they were listening to the screen (even as they did other activities) as evidence for how they were still following along the screen narrative, perhaps mentioning (as Mike did above) how they would "look up" whenever they heard something that piqued their interests. Others could use the presence of the soundtrack alone as a comforting accompaniment to their routines, similar to how music, radio broadcasts, podcasts, or other sound-producing technologies often create aural backdrops within the home that people alternate between incidentally hearing and deliberately listening to (DeNora 2000, 59–60; Frith 2003, 97; Hagood 2013; Tacchi 2009). As a result, it was hard to discern what senses a respondent was drawing upon when they referred to instances of attention giving. In many interviews, "paying attention" seemed to serve as a shorthand for "paying *visual* attention," while being "distracted" could refer to moments of exclusively hearing or listening to the text. Like other attentional boundaries, however, these distinctions were rarely made explicit and were often inconsistent.

Second, like the unclear distinctions between visual and aural attention, I must note how informal my respondents' discussions of textuality often were. Terms like "genre," "quality," "boredom," and so on often arose quickly and self-evidently as respondents talked about giving their attention to media, and, even as I attempted to glean patterns across multiple interviews, it was impossible to determine if people were drawing on the same understandings of these words. This presents a challenge to the kinds of close reading strategies key to much film and media scholarship that rely on more exacting definitional and citational strategies than come up in everyday conversation. Compounding this difficulty was the fact that many respondents often drew upon multiple, contradictory explanations for textual attention-giving at once, sometimes

within the same response. Rather than terms that systematically guided people's actions, the concepts I discuss below functioned more as ready tool-kits from which respondents could inconsistently pull in order to justify their practices, often after the fact (Swidler 1986). Consequently, my own exploration of these concepts will proceed less as a deep exposition of terminology and more as a mapping of how different experiences of familiarity (as expectation, mastery, or disregard) activated certain kinds and meanings of terminologies at different times.

Attention as Generic Mode

Teresa talked to me about how her familiarity with television could be comparable to the "mindlessness" of driving a car:

> **Teresa:** Driving isn't necessarily entertaining, but it can be relaxing, just like watching TV. It can be mindless driving somewhere you've been a million times, so people will sometimes look at their phones sometimes like a text because they feel like it's something they've done a million times. Just like watching TV is something they've done a million times. Even if it's a new episode of something, because it's the same cast, same feel, you know. You get used to that.

Crucially, Teresa's understanding of repetition here appeared to depend as much on the general situation of watching television as it did her on her familiarity with the features of particular programs ("same cast, same feel"). Academic work on narrative and genre has long wrestled with how different kinds of repeated textual recognitions link up with certain types of reception. Simply put, do texts themselves cultivate particular kinds of viewing styles (attentive, distracted, casual, critical, or so on), or do social groups construct patterned styles of spectatorship that they then bring to certain groups of texts?[4] There is likely an interplay of both; Barbara Klinger (1989) and Janet Staiger (1992), for instance, discuss how audiences bring different reading

[4] These questions can often be muddy when they come up in popular discourse. Michael Z. Newman (2010, 591), for example, writes about criticisms of the rapid-fire editing style of MTV in the 1980s and 1990, noting how, in sometimes the very same account, MTV could be seen as responding to the short attention spans of its audience even as it was blamed for having created those bad attention spans in the first place.

styles to texts, but within ideological parameters established by the circulation of other intertexts. In my interviews about attention, questions of where to lay discursive emphasis (on the features of the text versus the habits of the viewer) often arose as respondents tried to explain what attention they found most expected, necessary, or appropriate for certain kinds of texts.

Much of the most influential film and television scholarship has wrestled, even if implicitly, with questions about appropriate attention. Formal analyses frequently based arguments on theoretical spectators and preferred modes of attention which specific movies or TV shows addressed, solicited, or held. These works often retain a common understanding of attention as resulting from the work of textual devices attempting to direct or discipline audiences toward their preferred modes of perception or viewing activity. For example, historians such as Tom Gunning (1990) and Miriam Hansen (1991, 34) argue how the development of classical modes of film narration worked to solicit more standardized modes of attention from spectators than earlier, "primitive" cinema attracted. Neo-formalist scholars discuss how principles of Hollywood narration often work to repeatedly (and often redundantly) guide audience attention to important details of plot and character so they can follow along (Bordwell 1985; Branigan 1992; Thompson 1999). A bedrock of television studies has been how television programs are structured around assumptions of intermittent viewer attention: the television continuously attracts and re-attracts its audiences' focus, be it through daytime TV conventions that accord with the rhythms of household labor (Modleski 1983; Spigel 1992, 77–78), soundtrack constructions that repeatedly alert distracted viewers to plot details even when their eyes are away from the screen (Altman 1986), or programming cues that transition viewers between commercials and programming (Caughie 2006; Marriott 2007, 51; Moores 2004, 25). Though highly divergent in their frameworks and methods, all these understandings of textuality

often have at their core an assumption that the audiovisual configurations of certain texts work to fashion ideal modes of attention or styles of watching appropriate for those texts.

This notion of *appropriateness* appeared to be a guiding principle for many respondents as they rationalized their attentional expectations for particular genres. Their responses rested on a sense of innateness: particular types of texts simply seemed to "ask for" particular types of watching. In this way, respondents could quickly frame their levels of attention toward what they watched as being the most appropriate way of encountering that kind of text. To a large extent, this depended on the ability of respondents to quickly categorize exactly *what* they were watching at any point. Their sentiments depended on a number of factors, including: what they had already seen or heard of the text, expectations drawn from spoilers, promotions, or other paratexts (Gray 2010; Hassoun 2013), or general knowledge of a particular genre or convention (Butsch 2000, 288). Genre theorists have long argued about the importance of this semiotic identifiableness—or "verisimilitude"—to people's engagements with groups of texts: texts set up "systems of expectation and hypothesis" for audiences, which not only help those audiences render the texts more intelligible or predictable, but also allow them to place what they watch into categories and suggest the most likely courses for the narrative to take (Neale 2000, 27). Thus, if someone encounters media onscreen that reads as an "action film," they may assume that the codes expected from the action genre will continue to play out in relatively stable or predictable patterns. Film and media scholars have noted how any genre is a fundamentally unstable syntax: not every text under its heading is necessarily the same as others, single texts may traverse multiple categories, and rules of inclusion and exclusion are in constant change (Altman 1984; Naremore 1995/1996). However, as we might expect, in everyday conversations, these genre distinctions are rarely rigorous in any academic sense. When discussing texts

colloquially in my interviews, respondents treated genres as intuitive, obvious, and, above all, familiar. As Rick Altman proffered, "We all know a genre when we see one" (1984, 6; see also Klinger 2006, 143).

These seemingly-straightforward identifications of genre are significant not only for what they suggest about how an audience might understand the narratives or representations they see, but also how certain combinations of actions and "peripheral" behaviors could be treated as appropriate for watching certain genres. As Staiger (2000, 21) has pointed out, audiences engaging with genres like horror, comedy, musicals, or sing-alongs often bring with them divergent viewing habits and norms of conduct to match the situation (see also Svensson and Hassoun 2016). In organizational communication, Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates (1994) have referred to "genre repertoires," or assemblages of conventions that communities draw upon to guide how to perform during recurring situations. Orlikowski and Yates specifically discuss forms of activities and objects appropriate to business contexts (for instance, meetings might involve combinations of list-making, presentations, agendas, pens and papers, or formalities of conversation). However, repertories of action can also come to bear on spectatorship, where classifying a particular text as, for example, comedy or science-fiction may enable different performances of watching and not-watching (including use of smaller screen devices or orchestration of other tasks around the screen). These practices are not completely coherent, nor are they consistently applied to every instance of a genre, but they do encourage certain kinds of actions when encountering some cultural objects and not others (Devitt 2004, 77).

In interviews, this idea frequently came up whenever respondents told me that they felt more inclined to do certain peripheral activities for certain kinds of programs or movies. Much of this discussion emerged in reference to times when respondents felt they could follow particular

texts without "actually looking at them." Lily, for instance, told me that she regularly streamed television shows on her laptop while in the bathroom getting ready to go out for the evening.

> **Lily:** Getting ready, if I'm getting ready to go out at night, I'll put on my laptop on my counter. I'll be doing my hair or washing my face or putting on makeup or stuff. At that point, I'm not as much watching it. I'm listening to it.
>
> **Dan**: Anything else you do?
>
> **Lily**: I might be surfing the Internet. Walking around and doing cleaning and stuff.
>
> **Dan**: Is this all during rewatches? Do you also do this when you're watching something new?
>
> **Lily**: If I'm watching something new, especially if it's a documentary where it's more about what they're saying or interviews or stuff like that, I'll walk around, and if I feel I missed something important I'll just go and rewind.

As she made clear later in our conversation, Lily saw these practices as more appropriate for certain kinds of programs than for others. For particular groups of shows, she felt she could adequately receive her expected experience aurally from the texts without necessarily looking at the screen regularly, or while in the midst of getting her hair or makeup ready.

> **Dan:** Are shows different in this way [in terms of needing to pay more attention]?
>
> **Lily:** It applies more to dramas like *House of Cards* [Netflix, 2013–] or *Orange Is the New Black* [Netflix, 2013–]. Yeah, I guess comedies and stuff like that are less? It also depends on the visual quality of the show. Shows like *Veep* [HBO, 2012–] are more joke-driven, so I can just be listening and pick up on it just fine.

Peter echoed many of these comments. He told me how he often used his laptop during his television time depending on how much individual shows necessitated his concentration.

> **Dan**: What are things you might do as you watch TV?
>
> **Peter:** Writing emails, working on computer, maybe getting up to do some stuff nearby, just odds and ends of things. If I'm watching on the TV, I often have my laptop out to do a few things.
>
> **Dan**: Do you do these things all the time or only at certain times?

> **Peter:** It does have to do with level of involvement the show demands. So if I'm watching a *House of Cards* episode for the first time, I probably wouldn't do that because it's very gripping and demands a lot of attention, lots of details. If I'm watching *Adventure Time* [Cartoon Network, 2010–2018] or a cartoon or *The Office* [NBC, 2005–2013], those are less demanding.

For Peter, specific shows by their nature "demanded" appropriate levels of involvement, which he then could match with his practice (or not) of other laptop-related activities. Mike reiterated this idea in the way he described to me his experience trying to watch the science-fiction series *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015–2018) in the background as he did other activities: "I was painting and eating and stuff like that, and I realized that I couldn't do it because I was at the last episode and I didn't know what was going on."

As both Peter, Lily, and Mike's comments above suggest, the breakdown of programs considered more or less demanding (for example, *House of Cards* or *Sense8* versus *The Office* or cartoons) often implied a split attentional mandate between dramatic and more comedic series. This general regard that "dramas needed attention" while "comedies did not need much attention" was one of most frequent sentiments I heard. Tom explained the distinction in this way:

> **Tom:** If it's a reality show or a sitcom like *Friends* [NBC, 1994–2004]*, Modern Family* [ABC, 2009–], these short ones that have one episode as one complete story in itself. Those shows I don't really have to be there to know what's going on. I can pick up most of it. But in shows such as *Master of None* [Netflix, 2015–]*, Game of Thrones* [HBO, 2011–2019], *Homeland* [Showtime, 2011–], these overarching storylines, some episodes are really intense. Those shows, I don't check social media. If it's forty-five minutes to one hour, I'm mostly in.

Similarly, Richard used a split between serial dramas and episodic comedies to frame his inclination to watch shows full-screen on his laptop or rewind when he missed plot details (two actions he considered markers of paying close attention).

> **Richard:** Um, I think with those kinds of shows, it kinds of *requires* a certain amount of attention. And if you're not willing to give it, you're probably not interested in it anyway.
>
> **Dan:** Why do you think they require more attention?

Richard: It's just really long plotlines and character development, where if you miss too much, you'll be confused. Like *Game of Thrones.* Or *Breaking Bad* [AMC, 2008–2013].

Dan: Do you distinguish between longer-form shows vs. comedies or sitcoms?

Richard: Yeah. You can be a fan of a sitcom and barely give it any attention and you'll still know everything that goes on. It's such a formulaic thing. You know what's going to happen next most of the time. Versus dramas, they're exactly what they sound like and you need to treat them as such.

Dan: So if you're watching a drama, are you more likely to make that full-screen [on his laptop]?

Richard: Definitely.

Dan: If that's the case, will you still whip out your phone if a drama is on?

Richard: Yeah, of course.

Dan: Do you miss anything?

Richard: Sometimes, but I'll rewind real quick.

In these instances, the recognizability of genre formats could work in two opposite directions: knowing the formula of an episodic sitcom or a reality program indicated that less attention was required to "know what's going to happen next," while knowing the formula of a serial drama could signal the need for *more* attention to follow the narrative across multiple episodes. Even if they would still use their phones or do other activities across all different types of genres, most respondents nevertheless still placed some value on the idea that there were programs for which they needed to be more attentive than others (or, as Tom phrased it, to be "mostly in").

These responses also suggest how attentiveness discursively functions not only as an indicator of narrative complexity (in other words, how much one needs to watch to comprehend or make their way through the text), but also as a marker of distinction and quality. The choice of television programs considered more demanding (with frequent mentions of things like *House of*

Cards, Breaking Bad, *Master of None*, *Game of Thrones,* and *True Detective* [HBO, 2014–]) points to discourses about the rise of so-called "quality TV" increasingly prominent in industry and academic literature in the twenty-first century.[5] These shows have frequently been characterized by their larger numbers of interconnecting storylines, greater ambiguity in narration or character actions, or more prominent exaltation of auteur directors and showrunners than is typically seen with "normal" television (Jenner 2016, 266). The supposed quality of these shows rests partly in audiences' perception that they depart from more familiar codes of television. Jason Mittell (2006, 31) has analyzed the class distinctions in how such textual features work to appeal to a "boutique audience of more upscale educated viewers who typically avoid television" (see also Jenner 2017, 312). Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine (2012) further note a masculinist tendency in how these programs are applauded for requiring rigorous, multi-episode concentration, while more feminized genres like daytime soaps have long been disregarded despite their similar appeals to continuous engagement or serialized story arcs across multiple seasons or decades (see also Cassidy 2005, 11; Hargraves 2015, 78–79).

Newman and Levine (2012, 4) also make a crucial point that legitimation is a constantly ongoing process: quality cannot simply be discerned from the innate properties of a text, but rather how those properties are valued in relation to other kinds of texts (often in very class- or gender-based terms). In terms of attention and distraction, we can see how this insight may relate to different *viewing styles*: even if each text is assumed to invite its own fitting style of attention (as so many respondents assumed with specific genres), particular texts can still be seen as of higher quality because of the styles they are said to solicit. Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 95) described such predispositions as "hierarchies of value," where the tastes and attitudes people learn to

[5] S. Elizabeth Bird (2003, 121) and Matt Hills (2010) have criticized scholars for this focus on more "cutting edge" quality or cult programs that depart from ordinary TV, arguing that scholars frequently misrepresent the more run-of-the-mill television landscape.

adopt toward objects end up reproducing larger value systems about what is legitimate and what is not. Historically, this has meant that texts thought to encourage more "intellectual" or quiet, concentrative viewing modes are elevated, while genres that produce more bodily or emotional responses such as comedy, horror, romance, and certain forms of melodrama are denigrated as more lowbrow (Hawkins 2000, 4; Levine 1988; Williams 1998, 2012). In the cinephile group, for instance, Gordon explicitly framed his attentional obligation toward certain films according to what was warranted to them by their cultural standing.

> **Gordon:** I multitask a lot sometimes when I watch movies. It really depends on my investment in film, how much attention I will be paying…I mean, we all watch brainless things sometimes that don't really require a lot of attention. That don't require a lot of… I don't know.
>
> **Dan:** Okay, so do you think that the medium of film deserves your attention?
>
> **Gordon:** I think that depends on the movie itself.
>
> **Dan:** So you think that certain films deserve more attention than others?
>
> **Gordon:** Sure! [laughs]
>
> **Dan:** How do you distinguish between those that do or do not?
>
> **Gordon**: I mean, if I'm watching *The Avengers* [dir. Joss Whedon, 2012], that's just a popcorn flick. But if I'm watching a foreign film or an arthouse film, I feel like that was made with a different intention.

The attentional split that Gordon laid out between categories of films suggests a lot about his familiarity with certain value hierarchies. While he felt attention was necessary for more serious-minded work, he did not feel he needed to justify a *lack* of attention toward more "brainless" blockbuster texts, which he simply felt were of a lower status.

Given these tendencies, it is revealing how most academic work on quality television has presumed a natural linkage between "quality" and "deeper attention" as evidence for how certain

texts are special in some way.[6] Here, quality is taken as simply requiring greater attention. This argumentative track has been most obvious recently in reference to quality television discourses. For example, more pop-oriented scholarship like Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (2005, 62) or Tim Wu's *The Attention Merchants* (2016, 332) have talked about how television's rising narrative complexity increases the cognitive and attentional engrossment of audiences. However, some recent work in film and media studies also manifests this tendency, associating quality programs with time-shifting practices that "demand our attention in a way scheduled television rarely can" (Jenner 2016, 269), or describing them as "deeper investments from readers who then crave a payoff after giving so much time and mental energy to the text" (Perks 2015, 69). Even Newman and Levine (2012), in their critique of the cultural valuation of certain kinds of boutique viewing, nevertheless do not question the basic discursive assumption that these texts *do* involve a certain degree of built-in attentional commitment.

In my conversations with respondents, this deep synonymy between "quality" and "attention" often made it challenging to determine how people were valuing the nature of their attention to texts they said they liked. It became clear that "paying more attention" to a text could both be a general descriptor of what was required for certain kinds of texts regardless of perceived "quality" ("This is just how you are supposed to watch these kinds of things") *and* a way of signaling that certain texts were *better* ("I pay attention to this because it is of higher quality"). Oftentimes, respondents tended to mix and match both definitions into a quasi-casual relationship, effectively arguing that certain texts were "better" largely *because* they compelled

[6] This perceived natural relationship between attention and quality has varied roots. One thread can be traced to pre-industrial literary currents that treated attention as a rigorous poetic energy that readers needed to experience great works (Koehler 2012, 2). Levine (1988) describes the training of deep reading habits as an important part of the emergence of mass culture in the 1800s. More recently, there is also a tendency of associating "cinematization" with quality, where viewing styles are legitimated the more they replicate assumed norms of attentive theatergoing (Ellis 1992, 116; Newman and Levine 2012, 4).

the viewer to treat them in a particularly attentive way. As one exchange in my interview with William suggests, justifications for why familiar programs were warranted attention at certain moments could very often float between multiple understandings of what attention meant.

> **William:** If I get a text or something [while watching TV], I might reply to it, but probably not even then. It depends on how engaging the show is, for one thing. For example, I'm watching through *South Park* [Comedy Central, 1997–] for the first time. You know, *South Park* is *South Park*. It's not *The Wire* [HBO, 2002–2008]. You don't have to super pay hardcore attention to enjoy the show. It's toilet humor and fart jokes. If you reply to a text or something, you're not going to miss anything.
>
> **Dan:** So *South Park* doesn't require hardcore attention. So what is the difference between paying attention and paying, as you said, super hardcore attention?
>
> **William:** How do I put this? Just how intricate or smart the story is. *South Park* doesn't have much of a storyline. It's just these kids making ridiculous jokes and being crude, which is great. I love it, but…Take *The Wire*, for an example. *The Wire*'s plot, you really need to pay attention to it. Plus the characters' accents are really hard to understand sometimes, so you really have to listen hard. And it's basically how challenging the show is, how much attention you have to pay to get the main themes and everything. Something like *The Wire* is just trying to do things that *South Park* isn't.

By ascribing "hardcore attention" to *The Wire*, William was making a case not only for that program's narrative density, but also for its uniqueness relative to another, more lowbrow text like *South Park*—a show that, even if receiving some degree of attention, supposedly did not mandate quite the same level of investment. At the same time, William felt compelled to mention that he still "loved" *South Park*, as if concerned that his not paying close attention might be misinterpreted as meaning he disliked it.

In this way, William hinted at another factor in the discourse around attention, familiarity, and textuality. This section considered the ways that respondents discussed their attention as directly synchronizing with the styles of attention supposedly incurred or demanded by certain texts. Here, attending to something was effectively the same as saying that one was engaging it in a way most befitting its generic or cultural status, be it the single-screen attention "required"

of a quality text or the various household chores permitted during a comedy series. However, as William's clarification of his own inattention toward *South Park* implies, attention could also be a signal of one's attachment or endorsement toward a particular text, regardless of how its form or quality supposedly necessitated it be watched. At the same time that attention stood for larger social protocols of conduct, it could also imply an individual's personal investments with those texts, sometimes in contrast to what the protocols demanded.

Attention as Interest

Treating attention as synonymous with finding something interesting is so colloquial in the United States as to be taken for granted. Understanding attention in this way carries a certain intuitive psychological sense: of all the things I could be paying attention to, I have selected this; therefore, there must be something remarkable or worthy about it relative to other things in my life. Likewise, if I withhold attention from something, it is because it does not interest or entertain me.[7] In my interviews, this logic tended to arise whenever respondents described how they paid more attention whenever they started to "get more into" a particular film or television show. In this way, attentiveness served as a sign of genuine interest (broadly defined) toward a certain text. An exchange I had with Shelly was typical in this regard. Shelly described her tendency for phone use whenever she watched TV, but she claimed she was more likely to set the phone aside for periods of time whenever she was "really enjoying" whatever was onscreen.

> **Dan:** In those moments when you're using your phone for whatever reason, do you think you're paying attention to the show?

[7] This uses-and-gratifications framework has been a guide for many conceptions of audiences within the media and advertising industries, where, increasingly, soliciting and maintaining consumer attention is taken as a project of generating content that fits individual tastes and likes (Anderson 2008; Napoli 2003, 22; Pilotta and Schultz 2005; van Dijk 2013, 125–126; Yakob 2015, 153). Some social scientific work has also framed attentiveness as foundational for enjoying (feeling "transported into") media narratives (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004; Hamilton, Haier, and Buschbaum 1984). In all these cases, attentiveness (however defined) is frequently assumed to be a necessary precursor to being immersed.

> **Shelly**: I feel like I am. Because you can still hear it and see it on and off, but I'm sure I'm not fully paying attention to it.
>
> **Dan:** Does that bother you at all?
>
> **Shelly:** Depends on the show and whether I'm enjoying it.
>
> **Dan:** OK. Give me two examples: one where it would matter and one where it wouldn't.
>
> **Shelly:** Like, if I'm watching something my friend recommended and I want to say, 'I watched it,' but I don't really like it, I'll probably be checking my phone most of the time or looking up stuff about the show I'm watching. And if I'm really enjoying it and it's something new, then, yeah, I'll just sit at my bed or my desk and just watch it without doing anything. Maybe eating candy.

Here, particular repertoires of action linked to the phone allowed Shelly to signal whether a show was a more perfunctory text that she could glance at "on and off" or a special text that she would dedicate herself to "just watching." Shelly's discussion of which texts she specifically enjoyed was relatively nondescript, but as one section of my interview with James suggests, personal preferences could not be fully removed from larger discourses about appropriateness, quality, or distinction discussed above.

> **Dan:** If you're making your way through a movie you don't care about, does that affect your attention?
>
> **James:** Absolutely. If I don't care about a movie, I'm not getting invested in the characters or the plot, everything, I'll be more likely to check my phone. Or, if I get a text, I'll be more likely to give a full response and wait for a reply. I'll become un-immersed.
>
> **Dan:** Do you think that film as a medium deserves your attention?
>
> **James:** Absolutely.
>
> **Dan:** But you say that you're more willing to pay attention to some movies more than others?
>
> **James:** Yes. I mean, people like what they like. My taste does not dictate overall quality of a film.
>
> **Dan:** What do you mean?

James: If I love a movie, that doesn't mean it's better than something someone else likes. I try to, as much as possible, I try to, I like these movies and I think they're better than some others, but I won't tell someone that their opinion is less than mine.

Dan: So you recognize that people have different tastes.

James: Exactly, but in my opinion, there are some movies that deserve attention more than others and I'll pay more attention to those.

Dan: What are those?

James: Better quality movies. [laughs] Better written, better acted, better produced.

James framed attention toward particular media texts as a straightforward result of individual taste, which could vary widely by person regardless of how much the objective quality of those texts demanded attention (he nonetheless regarded his own attention as being in clear synchronicity with "better quality"). James also mirrored Shelly's argument that phone use could indicate lack of interest. Most respondents across both my cinephile and television groups seemed to draw upon this logic: if phone practices were a routine feature of their daily lives, then a film or program's *inability* to draw their interest away from the phone meant that it must be mundane as well, no more or less deserving of attention than anything else happening around them. In other words, even if they recognized the ways they *could* watch the text to get the most out of it, they sometimes simply didn't—perhaps because they did not "feel like it," perhaps because they did not enjoy a particular genre even though they had it on, perhaps because they felt an obligation to watch through a text recommended by their friends even though they held little personal interest in it.

Respondents like Shelly and James tended to frame this type of attention along relatively binaristic lines: either they were interested in the movie or show or they were not. Many other interviews, however, tended to approach the question of interest levels in a more granular and

incremental fashion. Annie, for example, described how her and her mother and daughter's attentions could flow and waver in and out based on momentary interest whenever they watched something that nobody in the room was really invested in.

> **Annie:** Shows like *Game of Thrones* or *Expanse* [Syfy, 2015–]. Those, I'm like tunnel vision, so that I see everything. It's like the rest of the world zones out and I'm very much paying attention…And then there's stuff like, on days when we couldn't find anything we all wanted to watch, to avoid fighting we'd watch things none of us really want to watch—at which point it's *on* and we're sort of paying attention. For the most part, we don't *watch* them. We're on our phones. We're on social media. We're doing other things and we just sort of look at it every once in a while to know what's going on, and if something grabs our attention, then we pay attention to just that bit.

Statements like Annie's point to an understanding of real-time attention allowance. Though she framed her favorite shows in absolutist terms ("tunnel vision"), Annie saw her attention toward less interesting texts as unfolding along stop-and-start rhythms. It was not that she outright rejected the text or withdrew all attention from it; rather, her attention was a more ongoing negotiation of curiosity about certain parts of the text as it played and interacted with her phone and other activities in the living room. This would support the findings of other studies that audiences sometimes turn to social media or conversation with other people in the room when they are "not fully immersed" in what they are watching (Wilson 2016, 184).[8]

Several respondents brought up the concept of boredom during these discussions. It was common for them to see incomplete immersion (and, hence, distraction) as a natural result of watching more "boring" texts they did not really enjoy. Entertainment screens have a complicated relationship with boredom, as film and media scholars have occasionally noted. Adam Phillips (1993. 78) has explained how boredom is itself a vague term, one that "includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings" that are difficult to pin down in any single analysis. For

[8] This tendency for audiences' attentions to slip away based on momentary disinterest is certainly not new. In her study of VCR use in the 1980s, Ann Gray (1992, 122) quotes one interview subject who describes how she and her husband would progressively "drift off" if a rented video didn't "catch our interest." Other respondents reported talking over their partners' shows whenever they found them overly boring (97).

example, some spatially-oriented studies have analyzed how screens function to pass and structure "dead time" within repetitive or routine environments (such as waiting rooms or airplanes) that are commonly experienced as monotonous or boring (Groening 2014; McCarthy 2001, 196). It is also common to colloquially refer to media as convenient means to distract oneself during otherwise boring times within the home—perhaps after work, before bedtime, or between other events in the day (Gazzaley and Rosen 2016, 165–170; Lull 1990, 165; Silverstone 1994, 3). Often, spending time with a film or television program is framed as effectively avoiding, mitigating, or interrupting states of boredom. Still other scholars like Jason Kelly Roberts (2015, 222) and Jeffrey Sconce (2007) have written more generally about the banality of how mass media texts routinely inspire boredom or dismay due to their failure to live up to their own touted potentials or expectations.

My respondents seemed to treat boredom toward *particular* media texts in a significantly different way, however. Rather than using the screen's contents to distract themselves from boredom, or suggesting some fundamental banality within media culture, many reported finding ways to distance themselves from specific screen content whenever *it* became too boring. This came up in reference to both film and television. Contrary to Christian Metz's (1974, 4) claim that "one is almost never totally bored by a movie," quite a few participants said that they intentionally pulled up their phones to help them sit through films they were not finding interesting. This was sometimes seen as a strategy for "getting through" the full feature without shutting it off or leaving the room outright. Catherine in my cinephile group, for one, wrote an entry in her viewing diary about her desire to check her phone as her impatience grew watching *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, 2017). Though she watched the film in a movie theater, her comments suggest practices of phone-glancing as boredom-alleviation that many respondents

also applied to home viewing.

> **Dan:** You wrote with *Wonder Woman* that you were bored and fidgeting during the third act because you couldn't check the time on your phone.
>
> **Catherine:** [laughs] That's amazing.
>
> **Dan:** You said that you would've preferred maybe having a quick distraction of looking at a time marker and then going back to watching.
>
> **Catherine:** That's probably a result of the structure of that film. It's really long and the final act just wasn't as good and I was getting bored. It was disappointing. In a better movie I wouldn't have wished to check the time, probably.
>
> **Dan:** So a distraction might be welcome if you're not getting into the film?
>
> **Catherine:** Yes. Even just a small one so I know, 'Okay, I only need to put up with twenty more minutes of this.'
>
> **Dan:** What does knowing that give you? Why do you want to know if you're twenty minutes or fifty minutes from the end or whatever?
>
> **Catherine:** I guess…It gives me some sort of, just where I'm at in the film and knowing how much more there is. Because if I had checked *Wonder Woman* and there was like an hour left, I might have stopped it. Like 'no more of this, please.' But twenty minutes only, it's like, okay, I can force myself to pay attention to only 20 minutes.
>
> **Dan:** I find it interesting that you wrote down checking the time as a 'quick distraction' because then it makes me wonder what other distractions might have been welcome for something like *Wonder Woman*. Like, if you had been watching at home, would, say, going on your phone been acceptable? Something beyond just glancing at the time for a minute?
>
> **Dan:** Acceptable? Maybe. Well, I still want to have some respect for the film, but I might text someone or something.
>
> **Dan:** So it's unacceptable but you might still do it.
>
> **Catherine:** Yeah.

In affirming her impulse for "unacceptable" phone use in the middle of *Wonder Woman*, Catherine suggested that she understood the kind of attention she was *supposed* to give the film to respect it or get the most enjoyment out of it; she just did not want to do so. It is important to

note how Catherine's attitudes, like James's above, may be partly tied to the relatively lower cultural status of the superhero film as a genre. However, this moment of willed-distraction-as-boredom cannot be entirely reduced to structures of taste. Catherine wanted to like the film, but instead found her attention fluctuating during particular sequences, which she claimed spurred a desire to become distracted momentarily. Chris Fujiwara (2007, 243–244) has written about this tendency of bored audience responses, arguing that boredom and excitement are not mutually exclusive affects. One may often experience immersion, excitement, or engagement through a voluntary, arm's-length haze. A text may succeed in bringing the audience into its diegesis, but it may still inspire boredom nonetheless: "it is necessary to separate 'affective and perceptual participation' from the 'sense of belief' that allows it to take hold. A sense of belief may be present, but participation may fail to occur or may be withdrawn" (Fujiwara, 240–241).

Work in reception studies has established how readers and audiences decode or digress from texts in ways not fully anticipated by authors and how their responses or interpretations negotiate between preferred and oppositional readings (Hall 2001; Klinger 1989; Radway 1986; Staiger 2000, 20). There has been less consideration, however, of how audience members, in their rejection of certain temporal sections of the text, may partially disengage with the text for lengths of time. Processes of decoding rest uneasily beside the will (or impulse) to do things *other than* decode.[9] In these instances, respondents often described temporarily swapping out one familiar or mundane activity (watching) in favor of another (a phone check, an intentional nap, or leaving the room temporarily) while the screen continued playing. These moments of distraction were rarely described as planned, even though the respondents attributed them to their own conscious decision-making. Tom, for example, had this to say when I asked him about

[9] My understanding of partial disengagement here differs from Jonathan Gray's (2003, 73) discussion of anti-fans as audiences who place affective investment in openly disliking a text, or who talk about hating a text even if they have never "actually" watched it.

situations where he used his phone while watching television.

> **Tom:** Most of the time, I'm probably just not into the show that much. Not into it.
>
> **Dan:** So you're passing the time?
>
> **Tom:** Maybe to satisfy that momentary boredom. Not just to pass time. I wouldn't let the show play and be on my phone the entire time.
>
> **Dan**: So most of the time, if you're watching a show you don't like very much, do you still keep the phone away for the most part?
>
> **Tom:** If I'm not too much into it, the humor's not working for me too much, I'll just pick it up for a moment and search through my feed or something for a few seconds.
>
> **Dan:** Why do you keep watching the show?
>
> **Tom:** Well, I like *most* of it. I also want to just, like, finish it. I don't want to leave something that I'm doing.

Tom held that his disengagements with his phone were temporary and fleeting and, even if reflecting a degree of disregard toward a show, nevertheless did not signal his outright rejection of it. Many other respondents qualified boredom in this piecemeal fashion, suggesting that it did not necessarily reflect their lack of interest in the film or show as a whole.

This logic carried over into the reasons some respondents provided for why they could find a particular text boring or uninvolving at certain times. Evaluating boredom is a notoriously tricky task, pulled as it is between the kinds of appeals made by the text and oscillating conditions that audiences might find themselves within (Schneider 2016, 198n10). Among the most interesting responses were those that specifically talked about boredom toward instances of repetition and over-familiarity. Here, elements of the text could become experienced as tiresome or redundant, or they were seen as so closely repeating generic conventions recognizable from other, similar texts that they became trite. For instance, one exchange in my interview with Gordon suggested a possibility for boredom at movie action scenes that could go on for too long.

His comments also clearly intersect with taste hierarchies discussed above that mark many comedies and action films as lower-status, as well as critical discourses that frequently treat action as an especially "repetitive" genre (see Tasker 2012, 58–59).

> **Dan:** What I'm trying to understand is, do you go into a movie with a certain preconceived idea of 'I'm gonna pay attention to this' or do you sort of initially do other things and then the film earns your attention over time?
>
> **Gordon:** Well, I'm not a huge fan of comedies. Just basic comedies, I'm like, 'oh, this isn't good.' Or an action movie that just has, like, a 15-minute action sequence. I'm like, I don't have to pay attention to all of this, to Liam Neeson fighting a thousand people. It can go on and on, you know. So for those types of movies, if they're not, I don't want to say brainless, but...You know what I mean. They don't have a lot of substance maybe. I'm more likely to play a game on my phone or whatever.
>
> **Dan:** So, is this a situation where Liam Neeson is fighting people for, like, the twentieth minute and then you pull out your phone?
>
> **Gordon:** Yeah. I don't need to watch all of that.

Another moment in my follow-up interview with Harry even more clearly illustrates this tendency to equate cliché with an allowance for distraction. In his viewing diary, Harry noted his distaste for whenever films used montages to indicate the passage of time, calling such devices tiresome and often unnecessary.[10] In one entry, even though he framed his overall attention toward the western film *In a Valley of Violence* (dir. Ti West, 2016) as "on the edge of my seat," he still noted that he checked his phone once during a brief montage sequence that showed the central character (played by Ethan Hawke) crossing through an open plain on horseback.

> **Dan:** I was fascinated that you would do other things while a montage played. So if you were doing other things during that minute or two, would you say that you were distracted?
>
> **Harry:** Yeah, I'd say so, in the sense that *maybe* there was good editing that I missed out on, but most of the time there isn't.

[10] It is worth clarifying here that Harry was using "montage" in its colloquial sense as a series of brief shots put in succession over music to quickly illustrate a character developing or accomplishing something over time, not the more academic definition of montage as a fundamental component of editing disparate images into relationship with one another.

Dan: Were there other moments in movies you watched that were also rote or boring, but you *didn't* decide to pull your phone out? What's special about montages?

Harry: They're not really there to advance anything in any meaningful way. You could just jump to the next scene, but they only include them to help people follow along.

Dan: So your sense is that montages are only used to fill time.

Harry: Yes.

Dan: When are they not?

Harry: Back in the 1920s? [laughs] I like montages, but most of the time they're not done well. It's like *In a Valley of Violence*: they needed to show him riding out of town to a camp for the night, and it's just 'here's him going up a hill, here's him going down a hill, here's the sun going down.'

Dan: And it's not important to pay attention to that?

Harry: I mean, I probably should, but ranking all the parts of the film where I should be paying attention, not really.

On one level, Gordon's comments on Liam Neeson punching enemies or Harry's on "time-filling" montages call to mind Kristin Thompson's (1981, 135) argument that the dividing line between "motivated" and "excessive" elements is slippery within any film, resting largely upon individual perceptions about how much material is needed to relay information without going overboard. Beyond questions about excess, however, these interviews suggest informal methods of ranking the necessity of attention at certain moments of textual interest—with "unnecessary" elements equated with boredom and, hence, with greater impulse to distract oneself. Paradoxically, the repetitions that establish audience's attention toward the screen (by way of grounding them in familiar modes of understanding and comprehension) could be precisely the elements that lead the audience to greater levels of disregard. Familiarity's spectrum of comfort/disregard was especially prominent here: the very elements that worked to attract the audience and confirm their membership in a genre or narrative mode were also the features spurring inattention and

disinterest because of excessive predictability.

The audiences' continuing relationship to the "boring" text even as they distracted themselves from it could take on several possible forms. A couple of respondents joked that their phones functioned as "life rafts" through uninteresting films or shows, allowing them to say they had completed them in their entirety, but without having to pay close attention all the way through. Without such distractions available, they said they might have stopped watching altogether. Distraction, in other words, was a means of navigating a completionist impulse for experiencing the "full" text while still being able to occupy oneself with other matters. Other respondents claimed that deliberate distractions functioned as a precursor to discontinuing their watching. Jocelyn, for example, talked to me about her experience trying to watch *Inside Llewyn Davis* (dir. Joel and Ethan Coen, 2013). A cinephile who took pride in watching films attentively and not stopping or interrupting most of her screenings, Jocelyn struggled to explain how her allowance for limited distractions when she was bored with a movie might lead to her toward discontinuing the film altogether for a period.

> **Dan:** Do you ever pause the film—not necessarily because of a bathroom break—but because something else comes up?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Oh yeah. If I find the movie maybe a little boring? I try not to stop in the middle of the movie and not go back to it, because I would want to know how it ends. There was a movie that was hard for me to focus on—*Inside Llewyn Davis*. That was a very slow movie, you know, like Coen Brothers movies. They're just talking and things just happen. So for that movie, I realized that I was just checking my phone in between. Like, 'I shouldn't be doing this,' but I was checking my phone. [laughs] And then I saw a text and I paused the movie and I started replying back. 'Okay, forget it, I'm not going to be able to finish the movie today.' So, I think I did go back but it was hard for me to focus then, so I just quit and later went back.

These calculations about whether a particular text was worth continuing were even more marked in discussions of television series, which required more time to complete in their entirety and where prolonged time spent with a program increased the likelihood of the viewer becoming

familiar with the show's narrative structure and repetitions. Larry, for example, had this to say about his experience trying to watch through the entirety of *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002) before becoming disengaged with the program's formula.

> **Dan:** So, if you're uninterested in something, would you just turn it off?
>
> **Larry:** If it's a fifty-episode series and you're on episode forty, and this one's not hitting, it will probably go back to being enjoyable eventually, so you can't just ignore that episode entirely. In the case I'm thinking, I was seven episodes into *The X-Files*, which is a hell of a long series and I was just like, 'You know, this was really cool for the first four, but it's following a formula now and I'm not into it.' So I browsed other things during that episode and then the next episode was the same way, so I just stopped watching it.

Larry placed the blame for his boredom toward *The X-Files* on the idea of repetition itself: as the series became less new to him, he grew more tired of it, leading him to stop it altogether.

Unlike Larry or Jocelyn, however, most of my respondents did not report necessarily pausing or discontinuing a text when they became disengaged with it. More often, the case was that they would leave it running in the background as they occupied themselves with other matters on and off. Academics since the popularization of video have frequently discussed whether expansions of playback control over film and television would impact the home audience's tolerance for boring viewing material. Scholars suggested that VCRs or remote controls might result in viewers speeding up videos or switching channels whenever they felt insufficiently entertained (Friedberg 2000, 440; Lull 1990, 171; Pedulla 2012, 76–77; Tashiro 1991, 15). More recently, analyses of "viewer control" discourses around DVD chapter skipping, DVR, and playback speeds on digital file players have led to similar speculations about home audiences "speed watching" to consume texts more quickly or avoid uninteresting parts of the narrative (Alexander 2017; Brereton 2007; Dawson 2014, 220–221).

Considering their potential for manipulating the speed of the texts they watched, it

notable how virtually none of my respondents actually reported doing so.[11] Some in the cinephile group opined that fast-forwarding was tantamount to "disrespect" for the medium of cinema,[12] while others (in both my cinephile and television groups) reasoned that even if a text was not interesting them presently, it may do so in the future, and they were content to browse their phones, shop online on their laptops, or solve puzzles in the meantime. Margaret in my cinephile group described one particularly interesting case of rewatching the Gene Kelly and Judy Garland musical *The Pirate* (dir. Vincente Minnelli, 1948) for the purposes of researching a blog post.

> **Dan:** For *The Pirate,* you were rewatching for a blog post and your laptop was open. Somewhere around the middle, you began looking at other tabs and 'missed a couple of moments.' So, what was happening when you were looking at other tabs? Was that related to the movie? Was it for the research?
>
> **Margaret:** No. It's just that, for a movie like *The Pirate* that I've seen a lot, there are moments that I'm not particularly fond of. Have you ever seen it? With Gene Kelly. Anyway, Walter Slezak is in it and he can be really annoying and over the top. There are moments where he is going crazy and I just try to focus on other things.
>
> **Dan:** And you know you can tune those out because you've seen the film before?
>
> **Margaret:** Yes.
>
> **Dan:** Why don't you just fast-forward?
>
> **Margaret:** Maybe I would, but since I had my laptop open and there were other tabs I was interested in and I just went ahead and tuned it out.
>
> **Dan:** So this was an intentional thing. Like, this dude appears onscreen and you're not a fan, so you figure it's your time to check other things.
>
> **Margaret:** Yeah, and also that blog post was kind of about the sexuality of the movie, so I knew there were scenes that didn't really pertain to what I was writing about.
>
> **Dan:** So in this case it was because of the nature of what you were writing about, it wasn't essential to pay attention to every moment.

[11] One exception was television commercials, which several respondents said they would happily skip or fast-forward through, if possible. Most of my respondents relied solely on streaming services for their television content, however, so issues about attention toward advertising rarely came up during the interviews.

[12] This was similar to the distrust some cinephiles voiced toward other types of playback manipulation such as pausing or rewinding, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Margaret: Essentially.

Margaret later told me that she might have fast-forwarded through sections of *The Pirate* in other circumstances; however, in this particular situation, with other tabs open on her laptop to fill her time, she simply did not see it as necessary. This was especially interesting given that she claimed her rewatch of *The Pirate* was mostly for the purposes of blog research and her attention was not as necessary for scenes outside of the ones about which she was writing. Even in this context of selective viewing, working through undesirable or unwanted parts of the film text involved shifting her attentional practices in front of the set as it played rather than manipulating the actual playback of the text. Boredom was something to sit half-attentively through rather than outright avoid or escape from.

This section considered how distraction could serve as a sign of fluctuating interest in a text as it unfolds, with respondents often treating uninteresting or boring elements in a film or series as license to disengage (usually temporarily). Disinterest could arise in reference to a sense of over-familiarity or repetitiveness—sometimes in response to the very generic pleasures the text was aiming to produce—but it rarely meant that respondents would discontinue watching altogether. The case of Margaret's willed distraction to her rewatch of *The Pirate* is especially notable, since it suggests that the impulse to continue watching could be linked to a familiarity with a particular text born out of repeated encounters with it. It was not simply that Margaret disliked elements of *The Pirate* or was familiar with the codes of its genre; she had specifically seen it multiple times before and was able to anticipate her favorite and least favorite parts. Rewatching sits at the nexus of familiarity, interest, disinterest, and expectation, and exists as something both illustrating many of the viewing styles discussed above and simultaneously challenging the way they are sometimes evaluated. The final section of this chapter considers

rewatching as a significant factor in many people's familiarity with media forms—one that, like almost anything marked as familiar, serves as justification for paying *both* more *and* less attention to something.

Rewatching as Mastery and Disregard

Film and media scholars have compellingly presented the case over the past few decades for rewatching as a lively and complex mode of textual encounter. To some extent, this push has been fueled by a desire to challenge critical theory's entrenched distrust toward the familiar—which tends toward treating repetition as, at best, dull, and, at worst, dangerously pacifying (Klinger 2006, 153). It is worth briefly summarizing what I see as two major, interrelating rhetorical lines that have emerged in the field to defend media rewatching against these sorts of judgments: *cinephilic fixation* and *fan connoisseurship*. These bodies of work have largely tried to rehabilitate repeat viewing by linking repetition to notions of attention as heightened interest discussed above. In some cases, however, this has led to arguments that have potentially misrepresented or misread important affective details about the impact of familiarity on viewer practice.

Cinephilic fixation. Many academic studies of cinephilia have aimed to explore how some viewers derive new points of perception, appreciation, and fascination within mass products like cinema (Caughie 2006, 8). While a detailed review of the work on the phenomenology of cinephilia is beyond my scope here, it is worth noting how much of film scholarship's construction of the cinephile has invested itself in particular "ways of seeing" said to break through the highly-coded and formulaic representations onscreen, effectively reinvesting the familiar with intense attachments (Robnik 2005, 55; Willemen 1994, 231). In

Christian Keathley's (2006, 42) analysis of the cinephile's "panoramic gaze," specialized viewers experience moments of revelation—an excessive fixation on or curiosity with shots, moments, and details within the film image—often beyond their basic function in the movie's narrative system. The cinephile continues to replay these in their minds after the film is over (see also Cardina 1986; Richards 2013, 4; Silverman 1995, 181; Toles 2010). Much of the scholarly treatment of cinephilia has been based on anecdotal accounts of this drive for "watching, rewatching, and remembering" (Amad 2005, 57), be it cinephiles' fetishistic compulsion to reconstruct certain times and places of viewing (Elsaesser 2005, 40), pilgrimages to production locations of films whose scenes they have memorized (Cunningham 2008), or nostalgic rewatchings of movies to enact imaginaries of bygone decades (Klinger 2006; Pett 2013). The key point is that even as they may adopt an ironic or skeptical distance toward the products of the culture industry, the cinephile's habitual returns to them often betray a deep immersion in and awareness of their smallest details (Seijo-Richart 2016, 161). Francesco Casetti and Mariagrazia Fanchi describe this as the cinephile's tendency to obsessively "reduplicate" a viewing experience many times "so that it becomes a measure of passion and intimacy toward the apparatus and its work" (2004, 39).

Suppositions about the relationship between these investments and cinephilic attention practices are most evident in discussions around videophilia and rewatching at home. Arguing against the idea that narratives are "spent" once they are consumed repeatedly, Uma Dinsmore-Tuli (2000, 318) and Barbara Klinger (2006, 153) have suggested that rewatching (and the textual foreknowledge it brings) actually afford audiences a sense of mastery over their viewings: reciting lines with the characters, anticipating certain scenes, recollecting personal memories from when they previously viewed the film, and using extra-textual knowledge of the

film's production (often gathered from carefully tailored discourses created within the industry itself) to feel like they are savvier, more perceptive watchers. Other studies on home viewership and DVD collecting have made similar arguments about the "closer reading strategies" and sense of distinction engendered by owning and mastering the minute details of texts (Hills 2007; Kompare 2005, 205). The link between rewatching and closer attention here is rarely made explicit, but the implicit assumption is clear: as Klinger (2006, 156) writes, re-viewing is neither passive nor mindless, but rather a potential "launching pad for experiences of mastery, solace, and observant engagement."[13]

Fan connoisseurship. Treatments of the cinephile's textual fixations intersect with similar work on fandom, which also draw on assumptions about audience fascination, attachment, and attention (Goodsell 2014). Many contemporary considerations of fandom also derive from attempts in the 1980s and early 1990s to counter prevalent stereotypes of fan engagement as pathological or passive (see Gray 2003, 67; Jenson 1992). Henry Jenkins's influential *Textual Poachers* made the case for fandom as a viewing mode involving subcultural play with and within texts (1992b, 26–27). Jenkins's construction of television fans emerges from his study of participants' self-described rapt attention toward preferred media objects as evidence of their more intense involvement. He writes:

> Watching television as a fan involves different levels of attentiveness and evokes different viewing competencies than more casual viewing of the same material…If television often competes with other household activities and therefore does not receive the viewers' full interest, fans watch their favorite show with rapt attention, unplugging the telephone or putting the kids to bed to insure that they will not be interrupted. (58–59)

Jenkins's portrait of the hyper-attentive fan has been central to other work that continues to define fandom as "sustained, affective consumption" (Sandvoss 2005, 6) or as so absorptive as to

[13] This discourse mirrors recent studies of literature and comic books that also argue that rereading can heighten attention by sharpening the reader's critical faculties or increasing their anticipation toward expected parts of the narrative (Calinescu 1993; Galef 1998; Hassoun 2013; Spacks 2011).

enter individuals into flow states where they can lose track of time or space (Booth 2010, 16). Even analyses into television binge-watching have referred to it as an example of how formerly-marginalized fan practices have been "mainstreamed," under the logic that binge-watching involves more dedicated forms of continuous, attentive watching (Jenner 2017; Sodano 2012).

Like cinephilia, constructions of fans' hyper-attention draw not only from their supposed in-the-moment concentration to their beloved texts, but also from their propensity for re-visitation. Jenkins (1992a, 210) builds his arguments about how fans build communities and alternative forms of meaning-production directly from his observations about how they tend to "reread repeatedly" and "faithfully" through reruns and video archiving. Sometimes, fans rewatch as a way of making sense of complex or tricky narratives, such as "mind-game" or "puzzle" films (Barratt 2009; Elsaesser 2009b; Klinger 2006, 160) or cult programs like *Twin Peaks* or *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010) that deliberately leave clues and open narrative threads for audiences to detect and discuss (Jenkins 1995; Lachonis and Johnston 2008, 153; Mittell 2009, 128; Newman and Levine 2012, 143). Other times, the fan might rewatch programs regardless of their intended complexity, such as Harrington and Bielby's (1995, 140) study of soap opera fans recording and revisiting episodes to spot continuity errors or study the plot's place within longer season- or series-wide narrative arcs. Regardless of the specific texts or the audience's interlocking intentions for rewatching them (forensic curiosity, nostalgia, devotion, ironic detachment, and so on), scholars have effectively positioned repetition itself as a domain for attention to the smallest details of the text (Jenkins 1992b, 73–74). The logic seems to go: rewatching involves mastery or intensified interest and is therefore attentive, because attentiveness is a prerequisite for mastery and a primary signal of interest.

It is not my goal to reject all these arguments about cinephiles and fans, many of which

derive from empirical audience descriptions of their own viewing styles. However, based on how my own respondents tended to discuss rewatching, I argue that scholars have largely overlooked some fundamental valences in how familiarity operates in repeat viewings. While a handful of respondents testified to rewatching specific auteur texts in order to more fully attend to them ("complex" texts by filmmakers like David Lynch or Stanley Kubrick came up on occasion), an overwhelming majority across all subject groups seemed to regard rewatches as a domain for greater distraction, though the specifics of these distractions took on a few different forms.

Most often, respondents reported that rewatching entailed the same repertoires of side activities or background listening discussed above; the only difference was that such behaviors were *more* likely to occur during rewatches and, ultimately, were more justified or forgivable. Some members of the cinephile group like Donna, who spoke strongly against side activities during home film screenings, nonetheless marked rewatches as frequent exceptions to the rule.

> **Donna:** There were definitely certain films where I've seen them so many times that, I definitely watch them, but I don't watch them with the same level of attention as something new or even something I've only seen a few times. And there are certain films I have an emotional connection to that I watch because of how they make me feel rather than what I'm actually seeing on the screen. Like, many people have a sad movie they put on to feel sad or if they need a distraction or had a rough day. If I've had a bad day, I'll put on *Ratatouille* [dir. Brad Bird, 2007]. People laugh at that, because it's not the best movie ever, but I saw it for the first time when I was applying for grad school and I saw it again right after I got in so it just reminds me of good things happening. […] So there are certain films I put on, not necessarily for background, but don't necessarily require the same amount of attention.

Donna elaborated later that *Ratatouille* "pulls just enough attention that it can alleviate some stress, but not so much attention that I genuinely need to look at it all the time." Klinger (2006, 168–169) has discussed these tendencies of repetition-as-stress-relief as a form of "cinematherapy": rather than watching to comprehend the text, the repeat viewer's main motivation might be to relate the narrative to personal memories and connections triggered

during the viewing. As many respondents suggested, however, the therapeutics of rewatching were frequently a result of *not* needing to "actually watch" the materials onscreen as much if not more than they were a result of piecing together memories of prior viewings. Rewatching *Ratatouille* was relaxing partly because it was more ambient, something that did not demand the "fuller" visual attention of something less familiar.

At the same time, Donna insisted that her more casual attention toward rewatches did not mean she was necessarily "backgrounding" the text. Like many other habitual aspects of the everyday, the rewatched text could be so familiarized—with most every detail memorized and known in advance—that distractedness could actually serve as evidence of one's attention. This was a frequent explanation I heard whenever respondents detailed why they did distracting things while watching texts for which they described themselves as fans. Sometimes, the very fact of repetition was evidence of their close attention, even as their momentary concentration wavered. Lily, for example, described her fannish rewatches of *The Office* in this way.

> **Dan:** Are you more likely to rewatch shows you're a fan of?
>
> **Lily:** Yeah.
>
> **Dan:** Are fans more attentive than other viewers are?
>
> **Lily:** Probably. It's hard to say because the first time I see something I will be attentive, but after that I'll fall into the distractions. Initially, perhaps, I'm more attentive, but the more you view it, the more distracted you are after that. Maybe other fans are different. Maybe other fans are like 'Oh, I love this episode, I'm going to give it my full focus' every time they sit down to watch *The Office.*
>
> **Dan:** But if you're a fan of *The Office* and you put it on, you personally aren't paying much attention to it?
>
> **Lily:** Yeah, or I might tune in at certain moments that I hadn't noticed before. But for the most part, I'm doing something else and I just put it on because it's familiar and I like the characters and it's something I've seen enough that I won't feel guilty doing something else.

For Lily, familiarity gave her license to be less attentive, even if she might still "tune in" to less familiar elements in the episodes as they arose. Many respondents seemed to equate their fandom toward particular texts with an ability to let their knowledge of the text play out "in their heads" as the actual text played onscreen nearby, as Madeline stated regarding her rewatches of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001–2003).

> **Madeline:** I've seen [*The Lord of the Rings*] many times that the scenes just play in my head. It's easy to zone it out just because I know it so well. If I have to do work and I want to watch it, I can always, like, put it on my iPad and that way I can switch back and forth to it while I get other things done. But since I know it so well, it doesn't bother me if I can't see it.
>
> **Dan:** If you're fan of something like *Lord of the Rings*, does this mean you're more attentive to it than other viewers might be?
>
> **Madeline**: I think it means I'm more apt to go back and watch it again.
>
> **Dan:** So is it based on how much you watch it or what you do as you watch it?
>
> **Madeline:** If it's a show I haven't seen before, if I'm really excited, I'm not going to do other things when watching a new *Game of Thrones*, so…
>
> **Dan:** What if you're rewatching something you're a fan of?
>
> **Madeline:** Well, I love a lot of certain scenes so I'll pay attention just so I can watch those things probably. And I remember the rest that happens in my head.

In these instances, it was not that respondents were rejecting parts of the text or that the text did not deserve their attention; it was that they had already paid attention to it previously so that doing so in the present was not seen as necessary. One respondent, Denise, summarized it like this: "I know exactly what's happening or I can glimpse it and know what's happening. So in that sense, I'm less attentive, but only because I've been attentive in the past. I've put in the work, I've seen it enough. I've read about it and done the extracurricular things." Another respondent, Betty, told me that since she had grown up watching every episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997–2001, UPN, 2001–2003) multiple times, she was now able as an adult to put

them on as stress-relief as she worked. This meant that not only did she not feel a need to look up at *Buffy* as it played, but that the prospect of watching fully could actually become irritating.

> **Dan:** You said [in the viewing diary] you were watching *Buffy*, you weren't very committed to it because you had seen it so many times, and you wrote, 'I did watch some scenes intermittently that caught my attention.' So were these scenes you realized were coming up ahead of time or did they just occur and you'd look back up?
>
> **Betty:** I think I was doing other things, but I was kind of listening. And when I heard something that interested me, I'd look and then if it was actually interesting, I'd watch it.
>
> **Dan:** Were these things you remembered happening in the episode before?
>
> **Betty:** These were things I think I had forgotten happened.
>
> **Dan:** So if they were moments that you were more familiar with, were you less apt to look up?
>
> **Betty:** Yeah, if I'd already gotten the whole scene memorized, I wouldn't have looked up. I actually tried to go to episodes… I know that if I pick an episode I haven't watched as much, I'll be way more attentive, but if it's an episode I've seen a million times, I'm not going to watch it. I might even get annoyed.

Betty explained to me that rewatches were relaxing precisely *because* they involved distracted watching. If she felt the need to closely attend to each moment of *Buffy* as it played, then it would not even be worth putting on. Across multiple respondents, this logic applied not only to materials to which they had professed fandom, but also to texts they had perhaps seen only once before. They could be acquainted with the text, not master of it, and yet this could still be enough to justify not fully attending to it.

In this way, the distractions linked to rewatching were rarely justified in direct relation to the actual formal features of the text itself. In effect, familiarity often superseded whatever appropriate or deserved modes of attention the text was said to solicit in its first viewing, making virtually *any* text ("quality," "complex," or otherwise across any genre) potentially susceptible to distractions. This sometimes complicated the stricter categories of genre attention that

respondents would talk about elsewhere in their interviews. For example, Shelly explained her tendency for rewatching comedies in this way.

> **Dan:** If you're rewatching something, how often is it a comedy versus a dramatic narrative? Do you put it on to fill space or do you put it on because you want to sit down to watch it?
>
> **Shelly**: In terms of filling space, definitely comedies, because for all of those, it's always my fifth or sixth times seeing those through. The first or second time, I'll watch them attentively. And then I'll just put it on in the background to fill up space.
>
> **Dan:** Is that the same with dramas?
>
> **Shelly:** Yeah, but you can't really rewatch those more than twice.

Shelly's comments appear to criss-cross several logics of attention, moving between the presumed attentional protocols tied to the text's genre or quality and her more subjective personal history with that text. Comedies, by virtue of being less demanding to watch, were more apt for repeat viewing than dramatic series that took more energy to follow along. At the same time, Shelly's attention to these comedies was also measured by how many times she had seen them before (after all, she professed to watching them attentively during first viewing). This logic could even extend to discussions about interest and boredom: William, for one, told me that he would likely pay more immediate attention to a mediocre first-time viewing than he would to a beloved rewatch he would put on in the background as he worked.

Ultimately, rewatching could draw on a wide range of motives. Klinger (2006, 152) mentions that her survey participants explained their rewatch of films with everything from aesthetic appreciation to family ritual to boredom. The key point is that by extending the viewer's frequency of encounters with specific texts, rewatching could also shift the norms of attention associated with those texts. This could, at once, mark a given show or movie as a site for heightened memorization or comfort as well as providing permission for arbitrary

disengagements: in fact, the latter seemed to proceed directly from the former. The very behaviors that, in other circumstances, might mark an audience as impassive were precisely the same as the ones that, in the context of rewatching, could signal attention. What was most special about these texts was also, ironically, what made them most familiar and most ordinary.

Conclusion: Familiar Fluctuations

This chapter has mapped a constellation of ways that familiarity, expectancy, and repetition justify both an increase and a decrease in levels of attention: people could say that their attention matched the norms of genre, form, or quality they recognized as appropriate for certain texts; they might withdraw their attention for a time when texts became *overly* recognizable or uninteresting; they might, in the case of rewatches, use this withdrawal of close attention precisely to indicate heightened levels of interest. Attention and distraction are clearly not only contextual terms, but also highly *bendable* in the ways they flow into and out of each other—pulled between commitment and disregard, comfort and boredom, appropriateness and inappropriateness—often all at the same time for the same text. In other words, media attention involved a fluctuating and pliable series of affects, not too different from the fluid ways we regard familiar aspects of our lives on any given day—as elements we feel a grounded mastery and fluency in, as vaguely dull routines we nonetheless sit through dutifully, as old friends to which we continually return. This bendability was often signaled by shifting repertoires of behaviors in front of and around the screen that took on ambiguous meaning. Did using a mobile phone in the middle of a television show mean that the respondent was not being attentive at that moment? Or did it signal that they were so familiar with the details of the show (whether through general recognition of its formula or their own personal re-visitations of it) that they did not need

to literally look up at the screen? Familiarity could stand, at one and the same time, as mastery of something and disregard toward it; it existed, effectively, as both attentiveness and distractedness.

Film and media studies has had a difficult time attending to the minutiae of some of these fluctuations, even as scholars have laid out in rich (if never, of course, exhaustive) detail the many viewing styles that audiences adopt in different social, cultural, and textual contexts. One roadblock is a continued impulse to over-emphasize states of heightened attention as a means of arguing against constructions of audiences as passive or unthinking in their media routines. If a common critical bias was (and, to some extent, still is) to criticize the repetitions of media life as insufficiently critical or distracted from a real sense of presence, then framing practices as *attentive* could provide a potential remedy—allowing for analyses of how audiences develop complex and active relationships with and repurposes of mass-produced texts. Close attention is also a useful, stabilizing concept for much genre and narrative work, allowing scholars to make arguments about the function of details within the text under the assumption that audiences will catch those details and piece together the text in analyzable or describable ways. In doing so, however, film and media scholarship has risked too programmatically affixing certain attentional states to certain theorized affects or viewing styles.

In an influential article on audiencehood and textuality, Jonathan Gray developed the term "non-fan" to describe an audience member who views or reads a text, but without the more intense involvement of a fan. Gray argues for non-fandom as a shade of audience behavior sometimes lost in the academic attention to fandom, one that fans themselves may often occupy. As he writes:

> Non-fans likely have a few favourite programmes and are fans at other times (for these are neither essentialist nor exclusive categories), but spend the rest of their television time

> grazing, channel-surfing, viewing with half-interest, tuning in and out, talking while watching and so on…Even many 'fans' are lax fans, watching when they can rather than when they must, loving a text but watching it only occasionally, perhaps even at times out of a sense of duty, and hence blurring the boundary between nonfan and fan. (2003, 74)

Gray is careful to note how fandom and non-fandom are not mutually exclusive categories, just as other scholars have pointed out how somebody's fandom toward a text can change intensities over time (Click 2007, 306). Nevertheless, this conception of fandom/non-fandom still risks locking into a binaristic mode of analysis, where individuals occupy one mode or the other at specific viewings of a text. If we take seriously the multiple, ambivalent operations of familiarity at work in any textual engagement, I would argue that the affects we might call "fandom" or "non-fandom" actually coexist and bend into one another much of the time. Expectancy, protocol, comfort, banality, boredom, and fixation frequently intermingle and overlap with one another during the viewing of any text, even as people try to separate them for the sake of intelligibility or to select one aspect to stand for the whole. The casual viewer may hold intensive interest for moments at a time, even as the dedicated fan may slip in and out, and in either case the poles of attentiveness and distractedness may not be clear. As Stuart Hall reminds us, everyone lives as "several different audiences" simultaneously: "We have the capacity to deploy different levels and modes of attention, to mobilize different competencies in our viewing" (1986, 10; see also Staiger 2000, 21–22).

Most of my respondents were generally fine with reproducing medium-specific arguments about, for example, the attentiveness of film or distractedness of television, or they were likely to apply generalized categories of attention to particular texts (saying they paid close attention to "quality shows," claiming they did not pay attention to "bad movies," and so on). These statements could be highly provisional, however, and sometimes fluctuated when we

discussed how the same text could be attended to differently at different times, how they might willingly become distracted during texts they knew they "should be" attentive toward, or how interest levels could change over the course of a single viewing. Oftentimes, the question of attention could be a matter of how to evaluate the causal reasons for why one's focus traveled between one relatively banal or mundane activity and another (for instance, between a rewatched program or uninteresting movie scene and cooking, cleaning, homework, or phone browsing).

On one level, these fluctuations are a reminder that media watching, even for the biggest fans of a particular text, "is only one part of being a person and usually a fairly small part at that" when placed within the flow of other familiar activities (Baym 2000, 213). At the same time, the propensity for our concentrations to attach, even if in fits and starts, to particular films or shows at particular times remains an important part of what daily life means for many in the twenty-first century. As Gray (2003, 76) notes, these texts "mean something to many of us, regardless of how little we watch them, yet this is a still under-studied realm of textuality." Ultimately, to see media watching as familiar is not necessarily to see it as a realm for more distraction. It can also be a signal of what we attend most closely. We remain committed to that which we may notice the least, because it is what we feel we know the most about.

Chapter 3

Twitching, Switching, and Bingeing: Negotiating Time-Based Distractions

So far, I have considered ways that people think of distraction as something that comes from outside the film or television screen that they must manage, ignore, or accept. In the first two chapters, respondents essentially understood attention as the perceived quality or amount of concentration toward a screen in relation to other occurrences *beyond* the screen: in chapter one, I examined how respondents ignored or mitigated unpredictable life flows in their attempts to consider their viewing contexts "attentive" (even if contingently); chapter two featured respondents deciding how much attention was warranted toward a screen depending on their expectations, interests, and familiarities with the content playing on it. Looking over the construction of attention in these chapters, one could plausibly conclude that "being attentive" means prioritizing screens to varying degrees against things. I refer to this discursive trope as "the attentive screen."

There is, however, another side of the attention/distraction dialogue, one that exists parallel to notions of the attentive screen and exerts a strong influence over popular pleasures and anxieties regarding media time. If managing interruptions is a frequent part of processes of watching, then what happens when interruptions are thought *not* to happen and watching is relatively unimpeded? Here, we can observe a discursive transition from screens as points of *attention* to screens as a point of *distraction*—what I refer to as "the distracted screen." Joseph Urgo (2000, 8) and Dominic Pettman (2016, 27) point out that what we refer to as a distraction can often be construed as a form of attention; it is just an attentiveness to something apart from other desired points of focus. As Urgo puts it, "distraction always measures the difference between where our minds are and the phenomena our minds *could* be focusing on" (2000, 10,

original emphasis). Indeed, one pervasive use of distraction within media culture is to apply this sense of diverted prioritization to the notion of screen attention itself: by giving one's attention to a film or TV show for a period of time, one may be distracted from other elements of life that are marked as more important. Maggie Jackson (2008, 259) notes how these questions of evaluation make it ambiguous what distractedness entails: "Are we paying attention to the screen or are we distracted by it?" The problematics suggested by Jackson's question—in which navigating everyday life becomes an ethical question of how to avoid paying too much attention to screens—will be the concern of the following two chapters.

This chapter considers logics of deferral, procrastination, multitasking, and indulgence that emerge when distraction is associated with concerns about excessive time spent with film and television. Within my interviews, respondents often discussed "distracting themselves with media" as part of larger questions of what lengths of entertainment were permissible at home for certain times. Situating these discussions requires an understanding of what acceptable media time means—including not only the relative values placed on certain types of media, but also the highly gendered and ever-shifting work/leisure contexts of the home. I begin by reviewing how and why time came to be seen as an ethical domain for individual management under shifting configurations of work and leisure under capitalism. Following this, the chapter examines two logics that underpin how my respondents tended to understand their media time as "too distracting." First, I outline assumptions that respondents made about medium specificity—namely, what hierarchies of value and taste people deployed to understand film or television as "requiring time" or "wastes of time" in various contexts, often drawing from assumptions about how particular media are foregrounded or backgrounded in focus. Second, I describe how respondents guiltily tended to mark media time as counter-productive ("twitchy") relative to

other, non-screenic activity. From here, I note the various, often feminine-coded strategies of multitasking ("switchy viewing") that subjects drew upon for negotiating what they regarded as excess time spent in front of the screen. Here, rather than a threat to watching attentively, extra-screenic activities could serve as necessary distancing techniques against being too attentive to (or too distracted by) the film or television show for too long. In my final section, I look at binge-watching as a case study in how the very attentiveness that respondents try to maintain toward screens can also coexist as a sign of distractedness from other aspects of daily life. I conclude by discussing how the tension inherent within this attention/distraction interchange suggests larger ambiguities about what it means to spend time well with media technologies.

Before continuing, it is important to note several limitations on the scope of this chapter's discussion. As detailed more fully in my introduction, the respondent pool from which this chapter's observations are drawn consisted entirely of undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom were entering white-collar professional fields. My respondents' current status as students and/or instructors was an important structuring factor in their labor/leisure rhythms, marking the home as a common site for homework, research, lesson planning, or grading, while also opening periods of the year as potential "breaks" from certain kinds of schoolwork (such as the summer months, when most of my interviews took place). Their educational levels and professional aspirations, meanwhile, inevitably colored the kinds of assumptions they articulated about notions of "work" or "productivity," how they positioned these concepts as parts of their self-identity, and how they temporally experienced work life relative to other blue-collar or working-class populations (Ross 2003). Additionally, my interviews focused almost entirely on practices of film and television, leaving out many other forms of leisure people could engage (media-related and not). For instance, some respondents noted how they actually spent most of

their spare leisure times with games, YouTube browsing, or social media checks on their mobile phones or laptops. These kinds of practices—which could be more spontaneously integrated as casual "snacks" during spare moments of the day (Tussey 2018)—potentially engage time and, hence, concepts of attentiveness in different ways that experiences of movies or TV. As such, my discussions of film and television time are not necessarily generalizable to all other types of media leisure.

Distraction as a Factor of Time

My interview with Teresa illustrates the ambiguity in how the attentive screen can slip into the distracted screen. Though she defined distractions negatively as unwanted "things that draw you away from the TV" early in our conversation, Teresa's comments began to shift when I asked her whether watching television itself could be a distraction.

> **Dan:** Can you be attentive to something that's still distracting you?
>
> **Teresa:** Yeah. If you're being attentive to TV, but it's distracting you from schoolwork or whatever, then yeah.
>
> **Dan:** Is any TV potentially distracting then?
>
> **Teresa:** I mean, no, but once you watch a certain amount, it is.
>
> **Dan:** How much time? Is there a certain threshold of time or something like that?
>
> **Teresa:** I guess it depends. If you're watching TV and it's finals week, then *any* TV is a distraction.
>
> **Dan**: So it depends on what's going on.
>
> **Teresa:** Yeah.
>
> **Dan:** What if you have an open schedule and nothing else to do?
>
> **Teresa:** If you don't have anything else, then it's not distracting.

Television time was distracting depending on its ever-evolving relations to other activities going on: watching instead of studying for finals was distracting; watching when there was nothing else to do was not. This kind of understanding presented a problem across my interviews, however, as it was rarely clear what it meant to watch in a context completely separated from other potential obligations.

In many ways, these ambiguities emerge from the very roots of the word "attention": as Jonathan Crary (1999, 10) details, processes of fixation, "of holding something in wonder or contemplation," are often discussed in terms of other matters being temporarily cancelled or interrupted. As previous chapters have discussed, attention is hardly this binaristic, as people often find their focus being pulled or floating among multiple things in simultaneity. Nevertheless, the idea of cancellation—that attending to one thing necessarily involves deferring something else—was a structuring one across my interviews and is a crucial part of attention's presumed moral weight: not only must someone necessarily put off certain obligations in order to engage in leisure time, but there is a constant danger of this time becoming over-extended, of spending "too much time" with entertainment to the detriment of other, so-called productive or healthy activities. If, as John Corner (2017) suggests, engaging media "nearly always and necessarily involves *not* engaging with something else," then virtually any act of watching films or television programs could be accompanied by a perceived need to justify why one chose to watch instead of using time in another way. This speaks to a tension in how modern recreational times are organized as part of general life time; as Jo Whitehouse-Hart (2014, 74) notes, entertainment is framed as both a harmless object used to pass time *and* a symbol of laziness and idleness depending on how much time it is used to pass. I discuss these factors further below, but first it is important to unpack several assumptions at play about time and ethics. Questions of

wasteful versus productive time-spending only make sense in relation to conceptions of time that see daily activity as an endeavor to be responsibly managed (Gregg 2018).

Michel Foucault's writings on "technologies of selfhood" are useful to engage here. Foucault analyzed how most subjects within liberal and modern societies come to conduct themselves more through acts of self-discipline than from physical threats or direct coercion (Foucault 1995, 2003a). Discipline is a productive force rather than a punitive or imposed one: people learn techniques, practices, and strategies by which they are supposed to best perfect their lives in accordance with goals of responsibility to society, others, and themselves (Foucault 2003a, 146). These sentiments about "the way one should behave" (or, as Foucault phrases it, how one can "practice freedom") exist within a field of institutions and forces (including, but not limited to, governments, schools, families, employers, experts, and so on) which exert pressures on what kinds of actions are more likely to occur (Foucault 2003b, 27; see also Binkley 2007, 118; Burchell 1996, 23). People act freely on their own, but always in relation to certain conditions of possibility, such as predominant notions about productivity or recommendations about how to live a moral or worthy life. Failure to practice, or to practice consistently, such disciplines comes to be seen as an individual, internalized moral failure (Foucault 1990, 25–28). The specter of failure is an important part of this, because it marks the self as an ongoing project to be worked on and perfected, even with (or perhaps because of) the absence of clear criteria for determining success (Reith 2004, 296)

For Sarah Sharma (2014, 65) the management of time has become one of the most prominent technologies of selfhood in contemporary capitalism. Specifically, notions of controlling time—of being able to choose, and choose *well*, how long one conducts certain activities over stretches of time—is seen as a key precursor to health and happiness. The

management of one's experience and perception of time, including how responsibly one can pay attention toward certain things for certain durations of time, becomes a part of one's ability to be seen as socially well-adjusted (Crary 1999, 4). This has been a particularly important element of life within consumer societies where boundary lines between work/production and leisure/consumption have been constantly evolving since the late nineteenth century (Graeber 2007, 59; Rosenzweig 1983). For now, the main point is that work/leisure separations at their core create peculiar, future-oriented understandings of how time must be responsibly managed; as Zygmunt Bauman argues, work becomes an "activity that derives its value from what it is not: it prepares the ground for the non-work of leisure time" (1999, 4). However, this does not mean that leisure is unstructured or completely open time: leisure itself is organized according to various logics about what is worth doing and, especially, how long one can partake in entertainment before needing to return work or other, supposedly more worthy activity (Allan 1985, 63).

These logics of work/leisure balance have undergone important shifts over the past half-century, specifically with neoliberal technologies of selfhood that critical scholars have described as becoming more dominant in the U.S. since the 1970s. With changes in Western economies from production-oriented Fordism to services-oriented post-Fordism, and the growth in communication technologies expanding possible times and spaces for work, white-collar work became less bound to the office and eight-hour workday (Crary 2013; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Gregg 2011). With this, work time becomes more "flexible," reaching into what, for some, had previously been treated as leisure time (though, as discussed below, the idea of a clean work/leisure split was always highly gendered and never fully existed). The leaky boundaries between labor and play times not only mean that more workers must find ways for

managing how to do work on their "own" times at home or on the go (often going beyond the hard-won forty-hour work week models of earlier in the twentieth century). More broadly, economic logics of optimization and productivity—of "getting the most" out of one's time—become ways for people to understand and manage themselves in all aspects of life. This type of selfhood—*Homo economicus*, in Foucault's terms—encourages individuals to see their days as continual projects of honing their efficiencies in daily tasks, maximizing time, and decreasing so-called waste (Foucault 2008, 226-229; see also Burchell 1996, 29; Read 2009; Rose 1992, 153; Rose 1996, 41). As Sharma (2014, 138) notes, neoliberal selfhoods effectively require that people become "entrepreneurs of time control," working to calibrate the pace of life on their own in accordance with the temporal requirements of their labor and social relationships.

Leisure, therefore, has an ethical dimension, pulled between notions of earned or acceptable indulgence and concerns about excess, idleness, or just generally "overdoing it." As Helene Shugart (2010, 111) notes, consumerism contains a paradox where promotions of excess and personal pleasure coexist alongside calls for temperance and self-limitation, with the failure to balance these poles appearing most forcefully in discourses that demonize addiction and various consumption compulsions (Binkley 2006; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 2002; Lepselter 2011, 921; Reith 2004, 283–284; Schüll 2012, 243). Often accompanying my participants' time watching movies or television shows was a low-level sense of guilt—a vague feeling that watching as a general activity needed to be qualified, defended, or justified in some way. The line between just-enough and too-much was slippery, though. It was rarely clear when leisurely attending to a film or television screen was an acceptable distraction from other domains of life versus an unacceptable deferral of time better spent elsewhere. Part of this ambiguity is due to how variable people's uses of different entertainments tended to be within the span of their

routines: what characterizes a particular medium or practice as an unwanted distraction in one instance could sometimes mark it as an appropriate use of leisure time in another.

However, there are at least two significant social factors that seemed to structure many participants' perceptions of when their media time was wasteful. On the one hand, certain media could be categorically regarded as distractions depending on how much time they took up within the day. On the other hand, any media could be wasteful based on their comparative relationships to other activities considered more productive. These two logics are highly interconnected, but the following sections consider each of them individually as they relate to how people try to mark responsible or irresponsible durations of media attention within their routines.

Watching for Too Long

David Foster Wallace (1993, 160) once asserted that television viewing becomes progressively more self-conscious the more time people devote to it: "[If] we spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. We start to 'feel' ourselves feeling, yearn to experience 'experiences.'" Wallace's claims exemplify an enduring critique that home electronic media are categorical wastes of time—durations of incomplete or inferior experiences—even if they are filling time otherwise marked as leisurely (Dawson 2014, 231). Whitehouse-Hart (2014, 75) notes the curious dialogue at work in home watching, where audiences frequently pass leisure times with technologies they claim are compelling or enjoyable even as they denigrate those same technologies for not filling their time well enough, or for filling *too much* time. This interplay points toward certain Protestant ethics of time, where time is seen as a resource "not to be wasted but utilized" (Southerton 2003, 12).

These practices are organized, in part, by value hierarchies that suggested which media

were more worthy of time than others. Such hierarchies rely on what Ilana Gershon (2010b, 21) has referred to as "media ideologies"—socially constructed beliefs that people hold about the nature of particular media that then affect how they use those media in daily life (for example, treating film as more formal than television, email as more professional than Facebook messages, and so on).[1] In the case of discourses of attention/distraction, the sense of formality or distinction that somebody learns to assign to a medium then affects their decisions to regard that medium as a wasteful or constructive use of time. In this way, my respondents' statements on the excessiveness of film or television time may be less a reflection of qualities of those media themselves and more a suggestion of how the time spent with those media come to acquire social value.

Richard, a university undergraduate, explained to me that he considered *any* television time to be a distraction in some way. Unlike Teresa above, who had regarded TV as only distracting when watched during weeks of particularly heavy schoolwork, Richard said that TV could only ever be a distraction because there were always other things he could be doing. However, this was acceptable—even desirable—as a function of the medium's role as entertainment.

> **Dan:** Is it weird for me to be asking about watching TV attentively or is TV just always a distraction?
>
> **Richard:** No, your questions make sense. However, I do think that TV is *entirely* a distraction. But it's entertainment. That's what it's supposed to be.
>
> **Dan:** Are most things that are entertainment also distractions?
>
> **Richard:** To distract you from the frustrations of everyday life, they're *supposed* to distract you.

[1] As I am using it here, the concept of "media ideologies" is distinct from more Marxist-informed work on media ideology, where media are said to establish a *false* or *mystified* construction of reality. For more on this distinction, see Gershon (2010a).

It was clear that labeling something a distraction was not necessarily intended as pejorative for Richard as well as many of my other interviewees; rather, a distraction could serve as a synonym for leisure, an oasis of time intentionally blocked off from other responsibility. At the same time, Richard still felt that certain amounts of distraction crossed from acceptable leisure to outright wastes of time, depending on the *length* of engagement.

> **Dan:** Is TV in general a waste of time or is it only a certain amount of it?
>
> **Richard:** Um, I'd say it's a waste of time. It can sometimes be healthy to relax and get your mind off things, but if you're dedicating an entire day to eating and watching Netflix, that's probably a waste. [laughs] I've done it, for sure. I'm not proud of it, but I've done it.
>
> **Dan**: Okay, so how do you know when you've watched too much?
>
> **Richard:** If you're asking yourself that question, you probably have already.

Richard's "I know it when I see it" approach for recognizing excessive distraction was a common one among respondents. Few were able or willing to define a specific amount of time it took for their watching to become excessive—though generalized images of "someone sitting and watching all day" came up on occasion.[2] Without a stable set of rules in place, evaluating the distractions of television—marking the point at which the duration of watching crossed from acceptable escapism to unacceptable waste, or even the ways in which "acceptable" television time itself was inherently wasteful—became highly context-dependent.

Sensing that one's entertainment time was becoming excessive appeared to be specific to *electronic* media. No respondent claimed that it was possible to spend too much time reading books, for example. Exchanges like the following I had with Rebecca suggested that hierarchies of distinction helped organize which types of entertainment could be ranked as greater time

[2] Part of this definitional difficulty may be due to the variance in respondents' baselines for what they considered their typical or normal watching times. Most respondents in my television group reported watching an average of one to two hours a day, up to four or five times a week. Others reported turning on the television for anywhere between one to five hours each day.

wastes than others.

> **Dan** So you would evaluate attention differently for books rather than movies or TV. Can you read too much?
>
> **Rebecca:** Not really, I think, because you have to use your imagination more. You have to think about the world the author is creating, as opposed to just watching it. It takes more work to get into it.
>
> **Dan:** And when you're just watching, you're not…
>
> **Rebecca:** You're not being as creative, not thinking as much. Obviously there are movies that are really intense—'what's going to happen next?'—but you're not thinking more along the lines of why is this happening? You're not thinking of why the characters are living that way or acting that way. You're immersed in someone else's world in the book as opposed to on the screen. On the screen, someone else is reimagining it for you.

Statements like Rebecca's about the inherent non-creativity of watching rely upon certain binaries of activity and passivity, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. For the present discussion, however, what is worth noticing is how Rebecca's understandings of the possibility for "overdoing" a certain medium depended on assumptions about class, education, and ability regarding the ease of access of attending to it (see Levine 1988). Under this media ideology, a book "takes more work" because of the value assigned to the ways of engaging it, and therefore it was difficult to spend *too* much time with it; since a movie or TV show involved "just watching," they were easier to get into and therefore more prone to longer investments of time. Here, the mark of good leisure appeared to be based not solely on how much time someone passed with a film or television show, but also on the medium's perceived ability to pass time *well*—often in reference to the longstanding cultural capital associated with that medium. As one instructional anti-television book aimed at middle-class families argues, "good" leisure activities "allow us to unwind but at the same time demand a degree of mental and/or physical exertion" (Brock 2007, 3).

Some respondents used these arguments about relative ease of access to suggest how

television was more of a distraction (and therefore a greater potential waste of leisure time) than film. As Peter explained to me, television was inherently more gluttonous than movies precisely because shows were usually "easier to get into"; he said, "movies have a bit more artistic merit and can perhaps be more edifying than five or six episodes of a TV show. The TV show seems much more mindless." Another habitual TV watcher, Mike, characterized the medium's distraction factor in this way:

> **Mike:** The screen always wins. If the TV's on, I will always get distracted. There will always be a part of me that wants to look up and see what's happening on the screen, even if it's junk. That's why I don't do homework when I watch TV, because I *know* I'm going to lose focus and I *know* I'm going to lose my thought process. I mean, watching stuff is fun, homework isn't, so obviously I'm going to pick TV over homework every time.

Statements such as these mark a striking shift in some of the understandings of distraction discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Whereas before, the low-cultural connotations of television had meant that it was permissible to conduct other tasks while it was on, such connotations now implied that television was in fact such an irrepressible draw of attention that doing other activities became too difficult. Rather than seeing it as a medium that was distracting because it accommodated activities outside the screen, television was now treated as a distraction because of how long or frequently it could potentially hold attention *to* the screen. As one respondent, Shelly, explained, TV was distracting because "it takes so much of your time."

Claims about the distractedness of television often drew from the medium's temporal connotations. Simply put, television is often figured as a lengthy medium. As television scholars have noted, a sense of continuous time has long been fundamental to the structure and scheduling of TV flow since the broadcast era (Doane 1990; Silverstone 1994; Williams 1974). In the time-shifted, on-demand landscape, many television programs continue to rely on the serial extension of narratives over multiple episodes, sometimes released over weeks or years, leading many

respondents to associate television-watching with greater requirements of time (in fact, given the growth in overall numbers of scripted series across various platforms, keeping up with multiple shows may require even more time now than during the broadcast era). Although individual television episodes were shorter in duration than most feature-length films, television's experiences of seriality informed a common perception that "watching television" typically involved sitting through multiple episodes (whether of a single series or multiple shows back to back). Respondents like Sarah couched her discussion about television distraction in these terms, arguing that viewing more than one episode of a longer series in a row felt like she was overdoing it (especially if she had watched more than she intended).

> **Sarah:** I just feel like an hour is a pretty significant time to commit to something and there's a pretty good chance that there's something else I *should* be doing instead of distracting myself with the TV for multiple hours. So if I'm watching a show that's between forty-five and sixty minutes, and I watched two of those in a row, I'm not sure I'd call that 'bingeing' or not, but I wouldn't feel good about spending that much time if I hadn't planned on it.

For Sarah, television was treated as distracting not only because she deferred other activities while she watched it, but also due to the sheer amount of time she saw it as occupying within her daily life. The relative simplicity of watching (particularly watching more than one planned), combined with the hour-long episode lengths of her favorite shows, made it hard to engage television in ways that did not necessarily take up "significant time" in the day.

Some of the media ideologies that informed respondents' association of television temporality with distraction could also apply to their views on film. Although films were often generally regarded as less of a time waste than television,[3] they could nevertheless be considered distractions whenever watching them took certain amounts of time. As Volker Pantenburg (2014,

[3] As discussed in Chapter 2, it was not unusual for respondents to draw from taste hierarchies that regarded film (particularly films deemed more "quality") as more worthy of attention than television (with attention understood here as a continual concentration to the screen).

337) notes, the image of screen attentiveness that so often informs idealized notions of cinema also makes the cinema a possible "distraction from the outside world" in a manner not unlike discourses around television. As with television episodes, there seemed to be an informal sense that one could watch too many movies in a given day or week—though, like television, it was not always clear when the boundary line between just-enough and too-much had been crossed. Several respondents in the cinephile group, for example, discussed instances where they reached a limit for how many films they could responsibly (or even physically) stand to watch in a given time period. This response arose most frequently whenever respondents mentioned watching back-to-back installments in multi-film blockbuster franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, or the Marvel Cinematic Universe—whose narrative seriality were not unlike that associated with television shows. However, as Laura made clear, any films could potentially take up excessive amounts of time depending on how spaced apart their viewings were from one another.

Dan: How many films do you see in a given week, roughly?

Laura: I used to get to watch more. Now, probably only one or two.

Dan: How much did you watch at your peak?

Laura: Peak movie watching? A film every other day? At worst, maybe two films a day.

Dan: 'At worst?'

Laura: Yeah, my most unreasonable.

Dan: So you think two is a lot.

Laura: Two films a day is a lot of time, sure.

Dan: Do you think above two is…Have you ever watched more than two in a day?

Laura: I don't think so.

Dan: So two is your cap.

Laura: Otherwise you start to feel lazy and tired.

Similar to television, Laura regarded films as having an upper threshold of engagement before they became too much. Notably, this sense of excess—of "movie fatigue," as one respondent put it—often carried physical symptoms, with subjects reporting growing "restless," "irritable," "achy," or feeling a general urge "to do other things."

However, unlike television, whose distractedness was usually couched in some guilt about not doing other activity, time-based movie distractedness was often criticized in more aesthetic terms as spoiling the movie-watching experience itself. For example, James from my cinephile group had this to say about his attempt to watch all of the *Star Wars* films one weekend when he found himself with some spare leisure time.

Dan: Have you ever watched so many films in a given day that they became a distraction?

James: Yeah.

Dan: How many was that?

James: At least four or five.

Dan: Why do you think that was too much?

James: At the end of it, my mind was just…I didn't care about any of the movies! They all blend together and I didn't care.

Dan: So above three is pushing it?

James: Yeah. I once marathoned all the *Star Wars* movies and by the end of it, I could barely even get through [*Return of the*] *Jedi* [dir. Richard Marquand, 1983]. Like, 'I don't want to do this anymore!'

Dan: But you still pushed through?

James: No! I had to watch the next day. I enjoyed it more when it wasn't just this constant barrage. It was a nightmare. [laughs]

> **Dan:** So why do you think there is a limit to the amount you can watch in a given time span?
>
> **James:** I think you have to process things. I think a really fun part about seeing a movie is discussing it and saying 'this was crazy, let's talk about this.' I think that's a very necessary component of movies. I don't know if everyone does it, but it's important for me. When you're watching it all at once, it all just mushes together in your head.

James saw over-watching movies as a distraction not because it was necessarily a categorical waste of time within his day. Rather, his frustration stemmed from a sense that time spent watching cumulatively wore down his ability to attend to the films in a way he saw as productive. With a diminished ability to "process" and "discuss," James found himself unable to convert his experience from one of "just watching" into something he could frame as more worthy of time, thought, or commentary, as many discourses about the importance of taking film "seriously" have emphasized (Wasson 2005). Paradoxically, sustained attention inevitably meant that one could no longer truly attend—at least not in a way that could be justified as rigorous or separate from other, more ephemeral amusements.

On the other hand, the inclination to treat cinema as a domain for more studious or unidirectional attention could actually make it a *greater* distraction than television for some respondents. Although interruptions and side activities frequented the watching of both television and film (as detailed in Chapter 1), television's enduring association with more casual viewing styles meant that respondents could treat it as a less conspicuous commitment of time. This discourse tended to draw from precisely the same understandings of television temporality discussed above, but with the attention/distraction polarities reversed: rather than mandating continual engagement, the lengthy, serialized narratives of most television shows actually meant that viewers could pick up plot points over multiple episodes without fully committing their attention at all times. Movies, on the other hand, were treated as more self-contained narratives,

and therefore required more continuous attention to follow along.

> **Lily:** It's easier to run through TV episodes because you don't always have to be focused and you can still probably pick up the plot as they're going on, but sometimes I'll stop a movie if I can't focus on it enough and then I'll come back to it another time.
>
> **Dan:** What's the difference between movies and TV?
>
> **Lily:** Since a movie is one thing that you'd theoretically want to do in one sitting, I feel like if I'm distracted, then I'm missing something that I can't then pick up on due to repetition in plot later or I can't go back to it as easy because I couldn't figure out for sure where it happened. Also, since it's just ninety minutes to two hours, I'd like to remain focused, if I can.
>
> **Dan:** Because it's shorter?
>
> **Lily:** Yeah, and since it's shorter, the artist is usually trying to strip out all the needless plot stuff. Or if there *is* needless stuff, it may be part of the artistic statement, so I'd still want to engage with the full thing.

This perceived need to "engage the full" film effectively meant that movies could not be backgrounded as readily as television in many instances. When respondents saw films as requiring more consistent or intensive attention, they could then begin to feel that film watching was a greater distraction, even though a single movie might take up less time quantitatively than watching TV. This could be the case even in situations where the respondent deliberately chose a film to be more casually watched in conjunction with other activities. One story that Laura wrote in her viewing diary is instructive. Laura and a friend selected *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1981) to rewatch on a streaming service while they intended to do some work. Midway through the feature, however, Laura realized that they were engaging the screen for too long to do other activities ("I'm not a multi-tasker," she explained). I asked her about this during a follow-up interview.

> **Dan:** When you rewatched *Raiders of the Lost Ark,* you wrote that you wished you could also do work while watching things.
>
> **Laura:** Yeah, like our intention was to sit down and get a lot of work done, but we didn't

want to be depressed about it, so we put on *Raiders.*

Dan: And then you just ended up watching *Raiders.*

Laura: Yeah, we watched *Raiders* and didn't do any work. [laughs]

Dan: So, in that situation, do you feel like you paid too much attention?

Laura: Yes. I tried to write and split my attention and just pay attention to the general stuff, like the arc of the movie, but I just could not do it. I was sucked in.

Dan: Is this an occasional or frequent thing?

Laura: That has always been the case. I can't watch things and be doing something else, really.

Dan: Even if you want to? I find it interesting that you *wish* that you could do that [work while watching movies].

Laura: Movies as background just don't work for me.

Here, we see a surprising consequence of the "myth of total cinematic concentration" discussed in Chapter 1, where film watching is assumed to deserve or mandate a totality of audience attention divorced from other disruptions or everyday concerns. In terms of time investment, the very practices of disruption-mitigation that subjects do to establish film as an "attentive" medium could also potentially turn film time into too much of a distraction.

This section considered distraction as a factor of time linked to medium specificity: audiences drew from their media ideologies about the formal and temporal requirements of certain media to evaluate when time spent with those media became excessive. The ethical value assigned to these tendencies was rarely consistent or coherent. Respondents could consider a particular medium (such as television) categorically distracting for being disposable or unchallenging, or they could regard it as a greater potential time waste because its accessibility or narrative serialization made them prone to over-watching. At other times, however, these very qualities (disposability, accessibility, serialization) could become reasons why television was *less*

of a distraction, because they did not require the audience to focus on the screen with consistent rigor. Meanwhile, other media like film, said to be less disposable or requiring more focused attention to follow along or appreciate, could instead become distractions because those same qualities precluded people from easily doing other activities besides the screen. Ultimately, perceptions of excessive time seemed to depend less on any features of the medium per se and more on how people regarded those features as allowing or disallowing them to conduct non-medium-related activity. The more one's attention was seen as compelled or "stuck" toward the screen (for whatever reason), the more that screen could be figured as a distraction from everyday responsibilities. The next section considers this *relational* aspect of distraction in more detail: identifying excessive screen time depended on how respondents understood the overlaps between their leisure and non-leisure domains of life at home.

Watching as Counter-Productive

Guilt about spending too much time on recreation emerges, in part, from historically-specific conceptions about how much work is necessary within a given day, as well as the spaces and times that work should take place. Perhaps the most common reason my respondents cited for regarding screen time as a distraction was that it kept them from more productive tasks for too long. Denise talked about distractedness in terms of a low-level guilt about never getting enough done in a day.

> **Dan:** How do you know when you have watched too much TV?
>
> **Denise:** Usually when I feel like I haven't been productive enough at the end of the day. Like 'I should've gotten that thing done today,' but I didn't.
>
> **Dan:** Will you feel that way even if you watched small amounts of stuff?
>
> **Denise:** Probably.

Dan: If that's the case, is watching any TV at all the issue? [laughs]

Denise: Again, it's that big question: Am I wasting my life watching TV? [laughs] I don't know. I don't have a ton of guilt about the TV I watch, so it's not something I've thought about a whole lot. But, yeah, sometimes there's something else I should've done and TV distracted me from doing it.

The distractedness of screen time arose from this type of guilt or uncertainty that it sidetracked other, necessary activities. This discourse relied on a goal-oriented conception of time as meaningful insofar as individuals can convert it into productive enterprise with clear future results (Bauman 1999, 3). For Betty, television was a distraction precisely because she was unable to translate her time with it into a product of which she felt "society" would approve. As a result, she framed excessive TV time, while pleasurable, as connoting personal deficiency.

Dan: If you spend all day watching one show, is that something you planned out?

Betty: No, it's an accident. It's like a happy and sad accident.

Dan: Why is that happy and sad?

Betty: It's happy because I got to watch all that stuff and my life is better. It's sad because there's literally nothing to show for, like, ten hours?

Dan: Why is that sad, though?

Betty: 'Cause it's socially inappropriate. Like, people would frown upon that.

Dan: Why do you think people would frown upon that?

Betty: Because they view it as unproductive, and we live in a society that only cares about productivity, yeah.

Betty's statements suggest, in part, the sorts of neoliberal modes of subjectivity discussed above, where productivity stands as a constant goal for individuals to manage on their own times.

This internalization of demands for everyday efficiency carries repercussions for the perception of time. Most importantly for this study, when productivity becomes a generalized

goal of living everyday life and people take on the responsibility for scheduling and micro-coordinating their own days, time is increasingly defined by its *inefficiencies*. Each moment takes on a feeling of lost *possible* actions (Andrejevic 2007, 96; Bull 2007, 72; Hassan 2012, 11; Hay 2008, 68). This especially becomes the case with media technologies. As notions like "progress" and "efficiency" become tied to the accelerations enabled by computerization, people may feel deficient when they can inevitably cannot keep up the pace (Hassan 2012, 123; Wright 2008, 19). As Tiziana Terranova (2012, 5–6) argues, participating in the new economy inevitably requires that people adopt some internalized sense of inefficiency or guilt about what they are *not* doing (or not doing *well enough*).

In his interviews with middle-class suburban families, Dale Southerton (2003, 6) points out the tendency for white-collar sectors of the U.S. to feel more rushed and harried in their daily routines, even if they seemingly have more "free time" than in past decades—a phenomenon other scholars have referred to as time famine, time poverty, and time squeeze (Moshe 2012; Perlow 1999; Southerton 2006). Southerton partially attributes this to rising expectations of accomplishment imposed on time, as subjects feel that there is always more they could be getting done within their temporal limits than what they are presently doing (2003, 15). In one respect, this state of "busyness" can function as a display of status, allowing some to suggest their privilege in the economy by showcasing their ability to work all the time "on their own times" (Gershuny 2005; Southerton 2003, 6; Spigel 2010). Even if subjects do not literally spend all of their time working, they may wish to give off the perception they are because of the status distinctions it affords. However, the sense that life is accelerating also creates a parallel discourse encouraging subjects to slow down, supposedly disconnecting themselves from the rhythms of fast capitalism by trying to calm down and narrow their focus to just one activity at a time

(Osbaldiston 2013, 5; Parkins and Craig 2006).

Discourses on controlling attention—often borrowing from economic understandings of "scarcity" and "costs" (Rogers 2014, 197)—tend to mirror these competing concerns about managing time speeds. This is most commonly seen in the form of debates about the necessity of "multitasking" versus "uni-tasking."[4] On the one hand, there is the demand for effectively and quickly moving between multiple, simultaneous tasks (multitasking); on the other hand, subjects are complimented for their dedication in maintaining focus on a single activity for long periods (Hassoun 2012). As Sharma rightfully notes, however, neither the flaunting of harried multitasking nor the privileging of one-at-a-time slow living truly escape economistic conceptions of time, since both assume that all that is needed for improved living is better individual time management. She writes how such discourses falsely imagine "that time is something everyone has, something everyone has access to, and something that can be shaped individually, given the right choices" (2014, 125).

Individual time management was a common theme for respondents expressing a sense that movie or television time distracted them from other enterprises. This appeared to be a source of self-doubt, as the goals of remaining productive were nebulous enough that any act of deferment could plausibly be treated as procrastination (Blair 2008, 12; Kingwell 2002, 364). Not coincidentally, these types of responses were most common in my discussions with graduate students, a class of knowledge workers whose labor typifies—and, to a degree, presaged—the kinds of flexible work rhythms idealized by the new economy (Cannizzo 2015; Finigan 2008). For instance, Peter, a graduate student in music, expressed some guilt that watching too much

[4] "Multitasking" was originally a computer term for an operating system's ability to manage multiple tasks. It was only applied to audience behavior after the rise of popular computerization in the 1990s and early 2000s—even though task-switching as a style of media engagement long predates that, particularly, as discussed below, among women. The application of the term to broader human activity reflects a larger tendency for seeing all people as inefficient, attention-splitting task jugglers (Hassan 2012; Hassoun 2012).

television was keeping him from completing other things he could be doing in his field.

> **Dan:** If you had an ideal, open schedule, how often would you binge [television]?
>
> **Peter:** It's hard to say, because there is a bit of guilt attached to it. Like it's not a good feeling, but maybe once a week?
>
> **Dan:** Why would you feel guilty?
>
> **Peter:** Because I would feel like I need to be doing something more edifying. Like, I'm pretty driven and I like to get stuff done and be really productive and I feel like I should be exercising or studying or blah blah blah. I'm a musician, so I should be practicing my cello.

Though Peter explained that he only felt he could responsibly watch large amounts of television after he "got stuff done," it was not clear what it meant to actually finish an appropriate number of tasks. Betty, a graduate student in counseling, shared similar concerns about television time, saying that she often felt the need to pause watching at least "every fifteen minutes" to check her email or do professional development tasks. She described this as a nagging internal voice telling her "I need to be working."

> **Betty:** There's a great chance I might pause and do something else and come back.
>
> **Dan:** What would cause you to pause it and come back?
>
> **Betty:** I think I have a problem with attention. [laughs] Like, doing work. I feel guilty, like I should be doing work instead.
>
> **Dan:** So if you have something else to do and you watch TV, you might pause the TV to go take care of the other thing.
>
> **Betty:** Yeah, and I always have things to do. So I might pause it and work on an award application for like an hour and then go back.
>
> **Dan:** Is there anything in particular that determines when you decide to stop the show to work on the other thing or is it more impulsive?
>
> **Betty:** It's definitely impulsive. I mean, if the show is really, really, really, really, really good, I might keep watching. But I get pretty anxious about not doing work, so I'll just pause it and do work.

Dan: But you will go back.

Betty: Yeah. It might not even on the same day that I go back.

Betty's pervading feeling that she needed to perform and achieve during her home time turned concentrative television watching into time she felt she could not often justify. Whitehouse-Hart (2014, 88) noticed similar tendencies in her interviews with middle-class professional men, arguing that her participants seemed reluctant to "lose themselves" in watching: sitting down to watch a film or program often got them "twitchy, anxious, and feeling guilty about not working."

This type of guilty, "twitchy" viewing could be directly related to job tasks, but more often respondents attributed it to a vaguer, more generalized notions of "being productive" which did not necessarily involve professional tasks per se. More often, in fact, respondents did not explicitly bring up their jobs at all. This is an important nuance of much of the critical work on neoliberalism, which has argued that contemporary work and leisure boundaries have blended or collapsed into one another, or that leisure itself has taken on business-like vocabularies of maximization and accomplishment (Dawson 2014; Moshe 2012; Rose 1990, 239). Discourses of productivity have certainly expanded to more leisure activities (and more people's experiences of leisure) than in past decades. It is not insignificant that nearly all of my respondents who expressed some form of guilt about their distracting media practices did so through some reference to notions of "not getting enough done" during their days. Even so, it is important to note how this discursive change is neither comprehensive nor complete: my respondents' understandings of the work/leisure split contained more gradations than the work on neoliberalism sometimes acknowledges. Specifically, my respondents did largely recognize film and television time *as* leisure, bound in certain experiential and temporal ways from modes of "being productive." As discussed above, this leisure time could itself be placed on a continuum

of productivity—with television, for instance, often placed below cinema or literature as a so-called productive or worthy activity. Regardless, media entertainment taken as a *general* category of activity was taken as bounded from other forms of labor that, even when framed in terms of self-betterment, were still largely seen as obligatory. It was precisely this boundary—this sense that movie and TV time was *different* than productive time—that formed the basis for many respondents' guilt about watching.

As Sam Binkley (2006, 344–345) notes, the problem is that *because* the logics organizing these domains of life are often different, they cannot always be easily combined, and therefore people must become "boundary-keeping subjects" responsible for switching between productive and playful pursuits, sometimes rapidly. "Productivist" ways of thinking are rarely fully incorporated into consumption practices, since consumption is characterized by ludic, playful, and pleasurable qualities bounded away from other aspects of everyday life. As Ien Ang (1991, 86–87) argues, television and domestic leisure often employ images of hedonism and escape from official responsibilities among their most prominent ideological values. For example, Jerry explained how the distractedness of watching stemmed from what he described as a gut feeling that he was stopping himself from "other things" on his itinerary.

> **Jerry:** If someone is watching excessively, I feel like I look back at that time and I wanted to get something else accomplished in that time or I feel like I could have spent some of that time better, or at least more productively. Doing something I had on my radar. It's kind of hard to explain, but I'll usually feel bad about myself for watching that much TV and being distracted for so long. And I think it is because I do have other things on my itinerary to do and I watched it to the point where I crowded out being able to do other things.
>
> **Dan:** So it all depends on how TV interacts with other responsibilities you have.
>
> **Jerry:** Yeah. But even there, I have this internal voice where I feel like I need to be productive everyday. For me, it's like, if I watched for X hours, I could've read a book or read up on something interesting to me. No matter how much free time I have in that day, there's always something else I could've done.

> **Dan:** When you say productive, do you mean work? Would reading a book be productive?
>
> **Jerry:** I think it's just bettering yourself in any way. For me, I like to read. I like to be active. Any way I can progress in any part of my life, physically, mentally, intellectually. I feel like I need to do *something* during the day.

Denise, meanwhile, expressed some hesitation about whether time with television, particularly shows toward which she and her husband were not especially interested, was delaying or deferring time she could be spending with other people.

> **Dan:** Is TV watching more of attentive activity or a distracting activity?
>
> **Denise:** Hmm…
>
> **Dan:** What's your thought process here?
>
> **Denise:** What I'm thinking about is, is it a distracting activity in the sense that's stopping me from doing something else with my life? Like, should I be doing something more productive than watching this television show? On that kind of level versus is it an attentive activity where I'm planning my days out around certain shows? I would say yes to both on occasion, and maybe both at once. I know for *Wheel of Fortune or Jeopardy*, sometimes we'll hold off on going to meet friends because we want to finish the episode. In that situation, it's probably distracting. It's a TV show we're not super invested in, but we're still willing to hold off on friends in real life until it's over.

Across these cases, we can glimpse recurring attempts to define the boundary line between screen time and time doing "something else" productive—with screen time often evaluated as comparatively inferior (and therefore distracting). Time with the television was time one was not tackling checklists of any number of other social, interpersonal, or recreational activity contra the media screen.

This section laid out some ways that respondents figured film and television time as distracting based on how it related to other demands on them to be productive with their time. Operating under the assumption that time was their own personal prerogative, respondents could feel indolent and unproductive for watching media in place of doing other responsibilities. These

responsibilities could be related to the flexible labor demands of work or schoolwork, but they were just as often a more nebulous ("twitchy") feeling that one ought to be accomplishing something besides watching. Given the skepticism expressed toward distracting media time across this chapter so far—movies and shows could be wastes of time, take up too much time, or siphon time from supposedly worthier enterprises—it is somewhat remarkable how few of my respondents said they actually set aside their movies or TV programs altogether. Although some noted that they would forego watching anything for several days at a time when they were especially busy or facing a looming deadline, respondents more commonly reported finding strategies for incorporating entertainment distractions into their routines in ways they found acceptable. The next section considers one of these strategies.

Acceptably Distracted: "Switchy" Viewing

Even as some respondents denigrated distractions for taking time in their day, they also frequently valued them for precisely those same reasons as tactics for procrastinating or delaying responsibility. Procrastination could potentially ease the tedium of unwanted tasks by providing a pause in when those tasks needed to be actively engaged or thought about (Barkhuus 2009; Whitehouse-Hart 2014, 77). Richard admitted that the specter of responsibility could actually *raise* the likelihood that he would distract himself with television, saying, "There's always the looming cloud of homework to do, but sometimes that just inspires more TV." Procrastinating involved more than just avoiding something, but also creatively devising "other things that could be done" (Kingwell 2002, 364). Catherine, for instance, told me she sometimes deliberately reserved films for when she desired to put off work.

Dan: Do you think that watching movies itself can be a distracting activity?

Catherine: Yes. [laughs] I've definitely watched movies while procrastinating. Like you have a report or exam due, and you're just, 'I'll watch this movie rather than doing those things.'

Dan: Does that affect the amount of attention that you pay to it?

Catherine: Yes, because, again, if I'm worried about something, it's hard to fully engage.

Dan: And then your mind might wander?

Catherine: Yes.

There are two crucial dimensions to Catherine's comments. For one, they suggest that distractions could serve as a form of affective boundary work, allowing someone to assert times of their day when notions of accomplishment and enterprise were not necessarily as paramount (Shaffer 2008, 14). Even so, Catherine's mind wanderings made it clear that procrastination was never a clean split from the domains of responsibility it was trying to avoid. Rather, the domain of entertainment and the domain of working could run simultaneous to one another—never fully bleeding into each other, but never divorced either.

Watching and not-watching times could co-exist on parallel planes, with attempts to avoid or delay work running simultaneous with attempts to get that very work done. Sometimes this was indirect—as in the case with Catherine's mind drifting to work tasks when watching movies—but it could also take the direct form of trying to multitask or switch between watching and working simultaneously. For example, Lana talked about occasionally streaming TV shows on her Netflix account while trying to complete homework.

Lana: I'm really the worst multitasker watching TV. I don't know if I was always this bad, but…

Dan: So what makes you want to do other things when you're watching something?

Lana: I guess, maybe, I guess it might be because TV isn't something I always need to pay attention, you know? Like, if I have a reading I need to get done for tomorrow, it's not that hard to pull it up on my laptop while the show plays. Or maybe there's something

I kinda wanted to get through on my Netflix, but I don't care about it that much and I have this reading I need to get done, too.

Dan: So you'd be reading and watching at the same time.

Lana: Yeah. I try to.

Dan: Do you ever have problems trying to do that?

Lana: Yeah. [laughs] Like I said, I'm bad at multitasking. So I'll have the PDF up or whatever, but I might be looking at the TV for a lot of that time. But I try to get my focus back on the reading since that's something I need to get done. And I do get it done, I guess. I don't know.

Dan: At least you get both of them done! So, why don't you just do them both individually?

Lana: I don't always know. The readings can be kind of boring sometimes, so I guess maybe having the show on helps get me through it.

Dan: Even if it's technically also distracting you from it. [laughs]

Lana: Right.

Lana recognized her homework was a distraction to her television watching, just as the television watching distracted her from the homework. In this way, the combination—the *switching*—of the two activities allowed for the coexistence of two seemingly opposed senses: the program permitted enough feeling of deferral that Lana could finish her "boring" work, while the work justified time that otherwise may have been "wasted" solely on television.[5] Of course, mirroring the twitchy guiltiness other respondents reported, Lana still felt that she managed this combination poorly and did not optimize her tasks effectively enough. Twitchy viewing could lead to switchy viewing, though not without some tension about how to execute it effectively.[6]

[5] As discussed in Chapter 2, respondents loosely classified certain types of texts as being more appropriate for this type of multitasking/switching than others. These texts were usually rewatches or regarded as lower-status and requiring less attention to follow along (such as reality programs or game shows).

[6] Drawing from an ethnography of how office employees toggle between work tasks and mobile media diversions, Ethan Tussey (2018, 36) argues that such practices of "cyberloafing" may actually boost productivity by decreasing burnout and enabling small, pieces of time for self-expression. In contrast to Tussey, my concern is less with the

This challenge of how to balance watching with simultaneous not-watching is not a new one, despite recent discourses decrying the supposed rise of contemporary audiences multitasking or splitting their attentions (see Hassoun 2014). Women in the home have historically had a particularly fraught relationship to concepts of leisure and free time. Specifically, women's disproportionate roles as homeworkers—combined with views of the household as a site of productivity to be managed efficiently (Sammond 2006)—have made women's spectatorship an activity frequently multitasked with childcare, housework, and other so-called womanly duties. Sociologists note this tendency for women to adopt "open-ended time" practices where their attentions can shift rapidly among unpredictable emotional, maternal, and household labor tasks (Adam 1995), even as many still idealize more sustained focus as a superior skill (Gilbert and von Wallmenich 2014, 71). In these contexts, any screen time is especially likely to be defined in terms of distraction and guilt (Boyle 2010, 282; Nathanson 2013, 101; Seiter 1993, 26).[7] In his ethnographies of family television viewing, David Morley (1992, 149), observed that, "it is not that women have no desire to watch television attentively, but rather that their domestic position makes it almost impossible for them to do so." Or, perhaps more to the point, it made it impossible for them to do so without feeling they were simply wasting time.

Film and media scholars have frequently analyzed different masculine and feminine viewing styles arising from this gendered separation of duties within the home. The earliest promotional discourses around television from the 1950s worked to position the set as both a

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presumed positive or negative effects of people combining media and non-media time so much as it is with how they frame certain balances of work/non-work as desirable or acceptable in the first place.

[7] Ann Gray (1992, 68–69) and Janice Radway (1984) extensively discuss the difficulties with media selection that their female participants faced as a result of this guilt over distractibility. For example, book reading was often preferred to television because it could be more clearly separated from other domestic routines. At the same time, reading was more difficult to justify for its inability to be combined easily with other routines.

respite from household chores *and* an integrated part of doing those same chores (Boddy 1990, 20–21; Cassidy 2005, 9). The housewife was particularly encouraged to move seamlessly between her work and the act of watching, thus smoothing over concerns that attention to the set was too much of a diversion (Spigel 1992, 86). Many of the classic studies of television reception noted how women tried to combine domestic obligations with television time, with the widely circulated image of the housewife folding clothes or tidying up while keeping one eye on her soap opera (Gauntlett and Hill 1999, 49; Geraghty 1991; Gray 1992; Hobson 1989; Modleski 1983). Cecilia Tichi describes how these sorts of television practices attempted to negotiate a precarious boundary line between allowing the viewing subject to enjoy time with the TV while simultaneously ensuring that they were not overly distracted by it. Unlike "just looking" (where the viewer only peripherally glanced at the screen) or "watching watching" (where she committed deep concentration to it), the housewife was said to adopt a third style of viewing, which Tichi calls "teleconsciousness" (1991, 126). In this mode, she could watch while simultaneously splitting her attention to more constructive actions: she could be described as "*both* ironing *and* watching" (118, original emphasis). Although the practices of actual home laborers were considerably more fraught with uncertainties, these discourses were significant in how they allowed the television to function as a point of leisure for women while theoretically not derailing them from other responsibilities.

It is important to note that, while gendered as feminine, these switchy viewing roles were never monolithic, nor were they always inextricably attached to women more than men in different contexts (Gray 1992, 119). For example, James Lull (1990, 166–167) describes how fathers returning home from work at night also likely had to practice split attention in front of the TV, whether by tending to children as their wives did kitchen work, or by continuing to think

about their jobs even as they watched television. Certainly, acts of home television watching were never fully separated from other work- or family-related stresses, even if the social dynamics of the household tended to attach these demands on women more intensively than on men. In recent decades, however, demands of flexibility and multitasking tied to femininity have expanded into a more aspirational mode of selfhood for the population at large (even as actual gender labor balances in the home often remain highly unequal) (Cady 2013; Thornton 2014; Walkerdine 2003). Rather than referring primarily (or exclusively) to a feminine subject position, switchy viewing styles are now treated as a more generalizable means of negotiating work and leisure at home. The elevation of these practices into something seen as less gendered and more universal only happened once home and work distinctions blurred significantly enough that middle-class men had to start performing these practices more regularly (Hassoun 2012, 657).[8]

Among my respondents (men and women), switchiness was often treated as a straightforward and obvious means of "getting things done" while simultaneously having the screen on. This took on a few forms. Denise, for one, mentioned how she would sometimes minimize windows on her laptop on which she was watching television so that she could pull up other windows to do some professional work.

Dan: If you watch on your laptop, do you ever minimize the window?

Denise: Yes. I mostly just shrink it so it's off in a little corner.

Dan: What do you do in other windows then?

Denise: Like editing—those kinds of things, work stuff, that requires a good amount of attention but doesn't need my whole attention.

Dan: And, again, that's usually for shows that you've either seen before or you don't care about?

[8] Even as switchiness is now taken as a more universal behavior, we should not overlook that women often still bear a disproportionate ratio of household labor (Craig 2006; Nathanson 2013). The broadening of switchy and multitasking behaviors does not necessarily mean they manifest in men and women's lives in the same ways.

Denise: Right. I wouldn't watch *Game of Thrones* like that.

Dan: If you do something like that, and the actual TV window is minimized, would there be anything that would prompt you to enlarge the window again?

Denise: As I get closer to the ends of episodes, I'll probably pay more attention. It gets more plot-driven at those points. I want to know what's happening at the end of the episode so that it can set me up for the next one.

Like other respondents, Denise did not see her distractedness as necessarily being an impediment to accomplishing certain tasks—particularly tasks she said did not require her "whole attention." Denise's switchiness relied on a potentially precarious balance, though: she was tuned into her show enough to know when to enlarge her viewing window during key moments of the episodes; at the same time, being *too* attuned to the program would defeat the purpose of trying to do her work. Philip, who reported cooking in his kitchen while watching lowbrow comedy films on his phone, phrased this balancing act this way:

Dan: Do you cook while watching movies?

Philip: No. Well…*Pootie Tang* [dir. Louis C.K., 2001] on my phone. That's cook time! [laughs]

Dan: Does that make you a distracted viewer?

Philip: For that particular experience, yes. In fact, that would probably be what I'm trying to do. That would be my intention.

Dan: You're trying to be distracted?

Philip: I'm trying to find a balance between being distracted from this movie and being distracted from cooking. [laughs]

Philip's balancing act between the movie and his meal suggests a strange dynamic in how the attention/distraction spectrum plays out with screens in everyday life. In many cases, subjects may be passing time with simultaneous activities, none of which they may find especially interesting, but which still provide ongoing diversions from each other. As discussed in Chapter

2, these overlapping activities could sometimes all be leisure-related—such as using one screen to distract oneself from boredom or familiarity with another. As this section has detailed, however, when one of these simultaneous activities involved a *non-leisure* activity, respondents felt a need to justify how they were able to accomplish that activity (even as they were using movies or TV to distract themselves from having to spend too much time with it). In this viewing mode—which both mirrors and expands the labor/leisure boundary dilemmas traditionally faced by women working in the home—there was still an incessant need to prove that one wasn't being *too* distracted; one was still able to "get things done" (be it a task as deadline-bound as homework or as routine as cooking). And as long as they were done, distractions were acceptable. In this way, switchy watching remains an especially *managed* practice, even as it retains connotations of procrastination or inefficiency. The wastefulness perceived with acts of watching (or with watching particular media or texts) may be tempered by their concurrence with other activity.

So far, this chapter has concerned itself with questions of managed wastefulness, as respondents attempt to position their own abilities as responsible watchers in relation to time spent with entertainment media and to simultaneous non-entertainment activities that were also happening. The final section considers television binge-watching as a case study in these issues of time-based distractedness. If much of the discourse around media distraction involves avoiding suggestions that one is watching screens for too long, what happens when subjects define their watching in terms of an open and conspicuous excessiveness?

Bingeing: From Distracted to Attentive and Back Again

Binge-watching discourses arise from the same sets of historical conditions about distraction

manageability that switchy viewing does—though bingeing seemingly presents itself as a more hedonistic release from the demands of a productive lifestyle. Since its discursive origins in online fan forums about TV on DVD in the early 2000s (Wu 2016, 330), binge-watching has suggested a form of excessive consumption, though the question is open as to precisely *what* it is in excess of (Baker 2017, 32). Streaming companies like Netflix began aggressively promoting the concept throughout 2012 and 2013 as a perk of access to their content libraries, particularly television series whose full seasons would be made available at once on their day of release. A key component of this discourse has been linking the practice to heightened audience control relative to "regular TV," asserting that binges allow the audience to act as their own "network programmers, schedulers, and marketers" (Becker 2010). In many ways, these conversations extend longer-standing discourses about the growing interactivity or customization of the TV landscape in the move from appointment viewing to the kinds of self-paced, time-shifting consumption enabled by video, DVD, DVR, and on-demand services (Brunsdon 2010, 65; Cover 2005; Cubitt 1991; Hills 2007, 58; Wood 2007). Such discourses also point to a pivot from discourses of the distracted screen to notions of the attentive screen: if binge-watching is a more deliberate and deliberative, it must therefore be a more *attentive* activity than the distractedness associated with other forms of television.

Most of the academic work on binge-watching draws upon these assumptions that binge-watching, attentiveness, and audience agency necessarily emerge from one another. Social science and uses and gratifications research on binge-watching has treated self-scheduling and extended temporality as allowing for "deep attentional, immersive" states (Rubenking et al. 2018, 70–71; see also Dickinson 2014; Pittman and Sheehan 2015). Cinema and media scholars have largely followed this same argument, often tying binge practices to "the deliberate, focused" (and

therefore more "socially acceptable") attention associated with fan behavior (Jenner 2017, 305), or a sustained focus that enables audiences to carve out time for "conviviality, pleasure and positive affect" (Coleman 2017, 617). Audience scholar Lisa Perks's book-length study attempts to reframe binge-watching as "media marathoning": rather than suggesting "mindless indulgences," Perks argues that marathoning "connotes a conjoined triumph of commitment and stamina" and "captures viewers' and readers' engrossment, effort, and sense of accomplishment surrounding their media interaction" (2015, ix; see also Baker 2017, 39; Silverman and Ryalls 2016, 521). Emil Steiner summarizes this position most explicitly when he writes how binges resist the "Idiot Box narrative" of other TV.

> If binge-watching is an escape from reality, so be it. After all, how focused is our multi-tasking reality today? When a binge-watcher attends one series for four hours, it may be his/her most focused activity all day. When s/he binge-watches to relax, s/he can now do so with more control and variety than in the homogenous Camel Caravan era. When you binge-watch, you do not channel surf, you do not have to watch commercials, and you can move about the series, and the world, freely. You make a conscious choice to closely read a text or to relax with soothing background sounds and old favorites. (2017, 156–157)

Rather than a distracting deferral of time, binge-watching here is said to turn television time into an act of attention allowing one to "escape from reality" (Matrix 2014). In this way, scholarship on bingeing has not been too far removed from the dominant industry framing of the practice as an innovation in audience choice and engagement (Spangler 2013; Wu 2016, 330).[9]

Many of my respondents echoed this discourse of prolonged binge-time as intensified attention early in their interviews when the topic first arose, even though (as explained further below) the distinctions between attention and distraction became harder for them to parse out the more they spoke about the subject. One key argument for the attentiveness of bingeing lay in its

[9] A 2014 poll conducted by Survey Monkey and *Slate* found similar sentiments among its respondents, with most agreeing that binge watching was "intentional and planned," the opposite of mindless or aimless boredom associated with activities like channel surfing (Roller 2014).

supposed lengthiness relative to other television watching. However, like other discussions of television temporality analyzed above, determining exactly where to draw the line between "regular TV time" and "binge-watching" was difficult to do. I asked each respondent in my television-watching group to tell me how they defined "binge-watching" and received a range of answers. Several respondents attempted to assign the practice a specific number of episodes or viewing hours: Betty and William each claimed six consecutive episodes were required for a binge; Tom settled on three or more episodes in a row for "longer shows" or ten episodes for "shorter shows." Others based their definitions around the lengths of time it took for them to finish a full season, like Larry, who said bingeing meant "watching the entire series of a show within a two or three day span." In most cases, however, crossing the edge of the norm/bingeing boundary came down to a vague sense of excessiveness more than a certain number of hours or episodes. Several respondents who provided more quantitative answers in their initial conversations ended up qualifying their definitions with more circumstantial factors when they returned for follow-up interviews. Shelly and Denise explained that determining bingeable levels of content was "more of a feeling" or "an attitude thing rather than a quantitative answer."[10]

Much of this feeling stemmed from how respondents demarcated binge-watching from other forms of live television watching (with the former marked as more "attentive" than the latter). Most respondents associated bingeing exclusively with streaming media, where respondents could select specific content on-demand rather than being beholden to the flow of a live television schedule. For example, Madeline told me that bingeing live TV was impossible

[10] This interplay between quantitative and qualitative factors also factors into many of the popular press discourses about how to define binge-watching. One widely-referenced 2013 Netflix-sponsored study measured 73 percent of streamers regarding bingeing as "watching between 2 and 6 episodes of the same TV show in one sitting" (Spangler 2013). One writer for *The Atlantic* criticized this definition, however, stating, "by this definition, I could watch two episodes of *30 Rock* [a twenty-minute sitcom] in a row and call that a binge—even though that's less than half the time it takes to watch a typical movie" (Feeney 2014).

because “it just keeps going,” making it impossible to watch forever, whereas bingeing supposedly entailed a more contained project of streaming specific programs. Shelly further suggested that live television was not as “concentrated” because the “content flows together,” making it difficult to pay attention to it for longer periods. Annie was perhaps most specific in arguing for this concept, suggesting that live television was something to “background” while binge-watching was a foregrounded commitment of singular and ongoing attention to the screen.

> **Dan:** How many shows back to back does it take for it to be a binge?
>
> **Annie:** Three.
>
> **Dan:** Even if you switch shows?
>
> **Annie:** No, only if it’s the same show. If you’re just watching things all day long, I don’t know, is that called bingeing?
>
> **Dan:** What do you think? If you just kept on the TV all day and watched it, would that be bingeing?
>
> **Annie:** That’s just watching TV. That’s something completely different. I do that also, though not as much right now.
>
> **Dan:** So what’s the difference between leaving the TV on for hours versus watching three episodes of one show?
>
> **Annie:** For me, personally, it’s about being invested in what I’m watching. It’s about whether I’m able to get up and walk away from it and whether or not I’m into the story. I mean, if I’m just turning the TV on, there are things that I want to watch and they’ll play, but I’m not necessarily *watching* them. Sometimes it’s things I’ve already seen before. So that’s background, and I know when the good scenes are coming and then I’ll watch the good scenes. But otherwise it’ll just be background to do whatever.

In these instances, referencing binge-watching was a way of indicating greater deliberation and viewer control. As Annie’s response indicates, this was partly due to a sense that binge-watching involved selecting texts of personal investment in which one was more interested in watching

fully.[11] However, there was also important element drawing from neoliberal conceptions of time and personal accomplishment: respondents could delineate their binge-watches as more "attentive time" because they saw themselves as holding more control over when watching time begins and ends. In other words, even as bingeing connotes a surfeit of watching time for *particular* programs relative to what appointment viewing provides, audiences could nevertheless see bingeing time as a more segmented and contained (and therefore less "distracted") strip of watching time than the continuous flow of live TV.

Other respondents defined binge-watching less by the raw amount of time they saw it requiring and more by how they saw it relating to the conduct of other activities in the home. Some attempted to frame bingeing as attentive precisely because it was intentionally demarcated from other activity—often describing their watching in terms like "buckling down," "actually watching," or "becoming immersed." For Albert, binge-watching often entailed more attentiveness precisely because its prolongation of watching time implied that it was separated from other concerns.

> **Dan:** Does your attention change at all over the span of three, four, eight hours?
>
> **Albert:** If anything, I'd probably get more attentive to it just because I get so much more immersed.
>
> **Dan:** Why is bingeing more immersive?
>
> **Albert:** I guess the more time you spend with it, the more trust you put in it. You just lose attention towards other things you might've been doing.
>
> **Dan:** Can you take a break?
>
> **Albert:** I will if I'm hungry. I don't want to sit there if I'm hungry because that would be uncomfortable. I'll get something to eat.
>
> **Dan:** Does binge-watching for you signal more attentiveness?

[11] As Chapter 2 details, this discourse follows (often quite vague) assumptions that people naturally pay more attention to, or become more immersed in, texts of personal interest to them.

> **Albert:** Maybe a little bit. Not as much for me personally, because for me, if I'm trying to watch anything, that's it, it has my attention.
>
> **Dan:** Is it any different than watching regularly?
>
> **Albert:** You're more attentive binge-watching than you would be just watching a single episode. I guess, if you're doing a single episode, it's something you probably do in the interim between things and you're thinking about what you're going to be doing afterwards. Whereas with binge-watching, you're settled in, like, this is what I'm going to be doing for a while.

Albert's conception of binge attention appeared to be based in a certain *deliberate* immersion: it was not simply that binge-watching took a lot of time, but that this was time specifically segmented for the purpose of watching, away from other activity. Moving television from an interim activity combined with other matters to a foregrounded time commitment indicated an act of individual will. Intentionality was a key term here: one binged specifically because one *chose* to delineate time in that way. William understood binge-watching as a distinct attempt to "*watch* something" rather than just "having it on" nearby. Another respondent. Sarah, framed it this way:

> **Dan:** And if it's [television] something you put on in the background for a few hours while you do other things, would you consider that a binge? Or for it to be a binge, do you need to be paying attention to it the entire time?
>
> **Sarah:** Good question. I think it, for me, it has more to do with whether I'm paying attention to it and at least intentionally watching.
>
> **Dan:** OK, so there has to be some level of intention or…I don't know, endurance?
>
> **Sarah:** [laughs] Yes. There has to be a level of intentionality. 'I meant to do this,' not just, 'I was working on something and the episodes kept playing nearby.' It has to be 'I am aware that the episodes will keep playing and I am still watching them.'

Like assumptions of total cinematic concentration, the attentiveness of the binge was said to arise from its attempted circumscription from the rest of everyday life (or as one respondent proffered, "you can't be doing other things").

Newman and Levine (2012, 132) note a masculinist tendency in how so-called "new" television practices are legitimized by being distanced from practices coded as more feminine. In the case of binge-watching, efforts to recast prolonged viewing as an attentive act often do so by positioning it against certain modes of switchy watching. This trope was clearest whenever respondents tried to clarify how their binges were distinguished from their parents' watching tendencies.

> **William**: My mom told me recently that she was going to binge-watch *Game of Thrones*. She used that term: 'I'm going to binge-watch it.' And I was happy, obviously, because I love the show. 'Alright, rock on. Let me know what you think.' At the same time, I was thinking, 'There's no way in the world that she is going to watch *Game of Thrones*.' *Game of Thrones* is so intricate. Like, there are so many characters doing so many things that if you don't pay very close attention, you are not going to have a clue what's going on. You aren't going to know who is on whose side, who is where. Like, you're going to be totally lost. My mom does not watch TV like that. She's always doing a million other things. It drives me crazy!

By William's explanation, binge-watching (particularly binge-watching more "intricate" programs like *Game of Thrones*) was attentive precisely because it precluded switchy practices. Determining the distinction between *binge-watching* and *just watching* depended just as much on a perceived immersion into screen content as it did on assumptions of what the television watcher was *not* doing at the same time.

Defining binge-watching attention in this way carried a risk, however. If binge-watching entailed a longer period of self-directed, sustained attention against other activities or obligations, what prevented this attentiveness from being figured as a distraction (as other forms of watching were often accused of being)? The attentive screen could quickly transform into the distracted screen. Larry seemed to gesture toward this problem when he told me that bingeing was not a result of raw watching time or individual choice alone; rather, it depended mostly on the individual's schedule. If someone had a job or "active social life," the threshold of time for them

to be binge-watching would be lower, since any watching carried a greater opportunity cost. Lily's response below further suggested how determinations of what bingeing meant were inextricable from how individuals structured other parts of their days.

> **Dan:** What does binge-watching mean?
>
> **Lily:** I feel like it means watching a season of a show in less than two weeks or something like that. But it might also just be that I'm dedicating a lot of time to a show even though I have other things to do. But I think also, at this point in my life in college, I have a lot of time where I'm able to be home and do other things while the TV is on. So that's a different type of binge-watching, which you're able to do if you just have more hours in the day.

Under Lily's description, it was not simply that she was "dedicating a lot of time to a show," but also that she was doing so "even though I have other things to do." As such, she was only able to binge because she was at a point in her educational and professional life when she could afford to do so.

As these responses suggest, the aspects of binge-watching tying it to choice and self-direction also made it a potential distraction to manage or mitigate. As discussed above, discourses of flexibility and self-motivation also frequently increase the burden on subjects for negotiating the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable action on their own, often without firm guidelines for determining success or acceptability. Pressure to not spend too much time watching television—to do things *other than* watching—can arise not in spite of, but because of associations of television with mobility, flexibility, and freedom (Dawson and Spigel 2008, 281; Hay and Packer 2004, 218; Southerton 2003, 10). As Rachel Bowlby (2001, 32) writes relatedly of discourses around shopping, treating consumers as active participants in their own shopping experience, able and willing to select and buy as many items as they want on their own, also has the effect of leading the shopper to wonder whether they are buying too much. Given this, it is not coincidental that binge-watching can frequently connote indulgence,

indolence, or even addiction even as it also implies individual choice and self-direction (Hargraves 2015). Perks (2015, 7–8) also suggests that "immersiveness and intensity" experienced by media marathoners suggest how they "sacrifice temporal control in their world of origin," pushing out "typical patterns in life's dailiness" and "cutting into sleep and work time."

This slide between bingeing as self-control and bingeing as loss of control lent some ambiguity to discussions about its attentiveness or distractedness. The very spectatorial conditions that allowed respondents to mark bingeing as attentive were also what could cast it as a distraction. As this moment in my interview with Madeline illustrates, binge-watching could never fully separate itself from a sense of *over*-investments, and with it, the internalized feeling of needing to be productive or do other (non-media) things. In this sense, binge-watching could be almost synonymous with procrastination.

> **Dan:** If someone is binge-watching a show, are they being hyper-attentive or distracted?
>
> **Madeline:** Depends on their schedule. If they're using it as a procrastination tool, then I feel like that they may be attentive to it, but I wouldn't binge-watch if I had a whole of lot of things I had to do.
>
> **Dan:** Why?
>
> **Madeline:** Because I like having good grades?
>
> **Dan:** I'm asking because before we even started talking you said that you binge-watched and you made a sort of guilty face, like you were acknowledging that you're being unproductive or bad in some way.
>
> **Madeline:** I use it more for procrastination if I know I have a few weeks to work on it. I usually do better work under pressure. And of course I could be working out or doing something healthy, but I don't want to.

Madeline's words echo some other research that one motivation for so-called bingeing activity may be desire for "escapism" or purposefully putting off undesirable tasks (Rubenking et al. 2018, 77–78). As Jerry argued, however, strategies of procrastination were often less a conscious

decision and more an impulsive indulgence in the wake of streaming content libraries that were seemingly bottomless and readily available 24/7. What perhaps began as a deliberate act of attention could quickly become over-extended to the point of distraction.

> **Dan:** Do you identify as a binge-watcher?
>
> **Jerry:** It's something I'm more hesitant to do but I'd say yeah, especially if I get into situations where I start watching something and I feel like I *have* to keep watching it. I feel like there's a negative connotation to binge-watching. It sounds like you're not being as productive.
>
> **Dan:** So it's a negative connotation because you're not doing other things.
>
> **Jerry:** It implies that you're idle, that you're not doing other things. That you're distracted by something.
>
> **Dan:** Are they being too attentive or are they being distracted?
>
> **Jerry:** Um, I'd say the act of binge-watching is, if you're going on to another episode, then you really are paying attention to that show. So you're probably getting overly attentive in that you're getting lost.
>
> **Dan:** Overly attentive?
>
> **Jerry:** I guess? I mean, I know there are times I'm so attentive that I can get drawn into something and I neglect other things a bit. To me binge-watching implies you're watching more than you'd gone out to watch. Like with binge-eating, you accept that you're overeating. So with binge-watching, that would mean you're watching with the knowledge that you're probably being a little excessive.

Here, it was not simply that one watched to avoid other matters, but also that one could become "lost" within the screen, neglecting those other matters for longer than intended (Jenner 2017. 314). As Rebecca phrased it, "sometimes being too into it means you're not in control…You're so involved in the show that you don't realize what's going on around you and how long it's been."

Perceptions of time overextensions led almost everyone in the study who discussed binge-watching to mention "twitchy" states of guilt or impatience strikingly similar to the ways

they had described "normal" television watching. This was frequently couched in physical terms, with images of feeling "groggy," "stiff," "oily," or "restless" to exercise, stretch, or get out of the house or go outside. More generally, though, it appeared as a vague sensation of wanting to not-watch: respondents said they felt a "drive to actually do something else" or an "itch to just do something rather than laying there and watching." Larry told me that after four back-to-back episodes of a TV drama, he often found himself at the limits of his ability to focus, describing an internal dialogue of "fuck this, what else can I start doing." Teresa described feeling "unproductive and lazy, like I should go to the gym or something." Shelly said that binge-watching inevitably took her to a point where, "I feel like there are other things I could be doing."

However, as with practices of switchy viewing, restless feelings to not-watch did not necessarily translate into respondents stopping their watching session altogether. Some instead found ways to incorporate side activities into their watching as a way of mitigating what they perceived to be excessive television time. Just as de Feijeter, Khan, and van Gisbergen (2016, 63–65) noted how their diary subjects incorporated leisure activities like instant messaging or social media use into their binge-watching, my respondents sometimes mentioned switching to simultaneous tasks to ease the toll of watching for overlong periods. Teresa, for one, reported taking care of her nails while bingeing *Suits* (USA, 2011–) with her boyfriend.

> **Dan:** Would you cut your nails because the TV had been on for too long?
>
> **Teresa:** Maybe. If I pay attention to a show for two hours or a certain threshold, I feel like I need a break mentally, so then I do something like trim my toenails. I can't just sit there for that long. It takes a toll on me.
>
> **Dan:** Why don't you stop watching and come back to it?
>
> **Teresa:** Partly because my boyfriend wants to keep watching. Partly because *I* still want to keep watching. I don't know. I want to see what happens, but I'm tired and my brain is tired.

Others, like Sarah, said she might pick up her phone or let her mind trail away to other thoughts, even though (or *because*) she felt "captured" by the show.

> **Dan:** When you are deciding to binge-watch something. I guess I'm trying to understand the impulse that arises when you go from one episode to the next. How do you know that you've gone too far, or you've hit just the right amount?
>
> **Sarah:** Well, if I've been watching a few episodes really intently and attentively and everything and I start to find myself distracted, that's a good signal that I have watched too much.
>
> **Dan:** What do you mean 'find yourself distracted?'
>
> **Sarah:** Um. Sort of being really captured by what I'm watching, letting my mind start to wander away from it, or maybe picking up my phone even though I didn't hear any alerts or texts.
>
> **Dan:** So you can become distracted even if you're still staring at the TV.
>
> **Sarah:** Yeah, my mind can wander.

Other respondents similarly talked about doing laundry or homework while rewatching their favorite shows in the background. As detailed in Chapter 2, this was often because they had less interest in spending large amounts of time attending to texts with which they were already intimately familiar. This led to a problem, however: the more that respondents admitted to using their binge-watching times to conduct other activities, the less they were willing to identify their watching *as* bingeing per se. Betty, for instance, often played episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* nearby as she went about her day, but since it was a program she had practically memorized, she was hesitant to associate this behavior with "bingeing" (which she associated with more prolonged attention). William similarly argued that binge-watching required "watching a show you haven't seen" so that one was less prone to switchy modes. The attention/distraction binary seemed to exist within a catch-22: either respondents saw themselves as "distracted" due to the uninterrupted attention they were spending with screens, or they were

"distracted" from not attending to those screens well enough (or both at once).

This section has illustrated how longstanding ambiguities about the wastefulness or excessiveness of media leisure have not left us, even in the discourses of interactivity and immersion that people often conflate with digital media practices. Respondents could regard binge-watching as more attentive than other, more switchy television practices due to its connotations of deliberate, sustained engagement. However, these same associations of deliberate watching could also make bingeing seem like an excessive or impulsive distraction, leading some respondents back to the mindset of needing to avoid over-investments of time that had actually motivated switchy practices in the first place. Old and new perceptions continue to coexist in relation to one another (Newman and Levine 2012, 152) and, as Barbara Gentikow (2010, 152) notes, modes of so-called participatory viewing often coincide with more "secondary monitoring." Djoymi Baker (2017, 35) phrases this as "both the hyper-distracted glancing viewer and the focused binge-watcher" persisting at the same cultural moment, "even potentially in the same viewer." As I have argued, though, this interplay of old and new practices does not simply mean that audiences choose between two coexisting styles of watching behavior at discrete times. Rather, there is slippage and overflow in the spectrum between the just-enough and the too-much. The more attentive one is, the more distracted one seems to be as well.

Conclusion: Spending Time Well

This chapter explored the ways in which film and TV time were said to defer or waste time. When time is conceptualized as a resource for individual management, my respondents sometimes felt the need to justify or apologize for their screen time (whether with a particular medium or across any medium). These justifications were often in terms attesting to their ability

to "be productive" in ways beyond the screen. Sometimes, this meant incorporating outside activities directly into their watching, drawing from gendered practices of housework prevalent throughout the twentieth century. At other times—like the case of binge-watching—it meant trying to recast excessive media time as a deliberate and attentive act rather than an indolent one, even though this framing of the attentive screen could very easily slip again into the distracted screen.

One brief moment in my interview with Ben reflects how difficult it ultimately is to critically evaluate these work/leisure boundaries in everyday life.

> **Dan:** Do you feel guilty after watching movies because you didn't do something else?
>
> **Ben:** Yeah, I've done that, but it's usually not anything super important. It's more like, 'oh, maybe I should have cleaned up the kitchen instead.' Nothing earth-shattering.

Labeling particular uses of time as distractions signals some self-consciousness about how one's practices depart from mandated or prescribed modes of behavior. Returning to Urgo (2000, 8) from the introduction, it points out the gulf between where we are and where we think we *should or could* be. At the same time, recognition of this gulf is rarely experienced as a big deal (as Ben says, it is usually "nothing earth-shattering"). There is a significant difference between (a) how subjects may think or talk about how they should act and (b) how they feel about their failure, inability, or unwillingness to actually act in those ways in every instance.

As I have shown throughout this chapter, respondents frequently expressed some guilt that their screen practices were violating some proper balance between productivity and leisure (typically in the form of seeing their time as too leisurely). However, this guiltiness rarely resulted in those subjects rejecting leisurely activity altogether. Instead, leisureliness persisted in different forms as respondents attempted to negotiate the boundary line between what they wanted to do and what they felt they needed to do—for instance, by integrating or multitasking

productive activities into their media time in switchy ways, or by using media to procrastinate from their responsibilities outright. We should not forget that one potential motivation for binge-watching may be the prolonged abdication of responsibility, a conspicuous overconsumption whose appeals lie, like other practices of partying, binge-drinking, or drug use, in its "blissful state of non-responsibility" or "never-ending moral holiday" beyond the confines of moderation (Presdee, quoted in Crabbe 2006, 161). Even if people internalize discourses of productivity, that does not imply they desire to or care about abiding by them at every moment. In other words, the slippage from "being attentive" to "being distracted" may not be some unfortunate side effect of someone's media time. It may actually be part of the point of it. After all, people generally want more from their lives than just efficiency, productivity, or opportunities to do more work, even as their attempts to defer this work can often be guilt-inducing (Tussey 2018, 177).

This does not mean we should necessarily take times of distraction (in other words, spending too long "wasting time" or "not being productive") as holding some resistive or radical potential. For one, as previous chapters have explored, film and television attention also accords by its own sets of rules, pressures, and prescriptions. Furthermore, as critics have broadly argued since the Frankfurt School up through the present day, media entertainment time can replicate some of the very conditions of capitalism from which they are said to be escapes (Gitlin 1979; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) or they may involve still other forms of tracking or unpaid audience labor (Andrejevic 2006; Bogard 2008; Terranova 2012; Wise 2012). By any number of critical frameworks, an audience member using a television show to temporarily distract from work is not necessarily stepping outside the broader relations of work within which they live.

Regardless, the existence of and allowance for "distracting" media is still important for suggesting how many people understand leisure time fitting into their general life time. In his

study of recreational cultures in Massachusetts in the early twentieth century, Roy Rosenzweig argues for the experiential importance of non-work times for the people who live them. Rosenzweig notes how industrialists never held unchallenged authority over all aspects of working-class life. In clubs, saloons, and other sites, day laborers frequently carried out modes of life "significantly different from those prescribed by the dominant industrial elite" (1983, 27). Often these commercial non-work spaces provided opportunity for more "relaxed," less deliberately concentrative, or even rowdy forms of sociality (44). These practices were not oppositional, however: the prevailing attitude of the saloon or nickelodeon theater was not to change society outright, but rather to find alternative ways of spending one's time and "to be left alone with them" (64). My respondents' conceptions of home leisure in the twenty-first century are obviously quite different from a blue-collar worker's experiences of public leisure at the dawn of the twentieth, but both grapple with questions about how to define time spans that do not feel like they need to be fully tethered to the demands of "accomplishing something."

Even as film and television can be seen as a means of enjoying the moment, the time spent with them is seen as having responsible limits. If there was one thing nearly all of my respondents could agree on, it was that media time should ideally not make up the majority of the day, even if it were possible. That is, media time had to leave open the possibility for some non-media time.

> **Dan:** Does [guiltiness about watching TV] also apply to if you had an open schedule with nothing to do? Would a certain amount of TV still be excessive?
>
> **Jerry:** Even if I'm on vacation or on spring break and I have nothing else to do, I'd still feel guilty spending the whole day watching TV. It goes both ways. I obviously don't feel so guilty that I won't do it sometimes. I don't feel guilty if I'm not always going something. But there is a threshold for me. No matter what is going on each day, I can't spend it solely on recreation.

As Jerry suggests, one could be distracted from the obligations of the everyday, but never too

distracted. There was always something else to do, a sense that life needs to be lived "to the fullest," that "every second should explode with richness, satisfaction," or at least accomplish more than could the act of watching something (Stoekl 1999, 37). As Paddy Scannell poignantly asks, what does it mean when the leisurely media time for which so many people strive also becomes that which we see as wasteful or counter-productive to the everyday?

> Is it not a truth and a truism that watching television is a 'waste of time', an activity (if such it is) fit only for couch potatoes? Do we not all feel this at times, and do we not mean that we could be doing something better with our time?…My-time, my time on earth – precious because it is finite, because I only have one life (but many lives) which must be lived before I die…Does the chatter and noise of the everyday world shut out and avoid that inescapable reality?" (1996, 173)

In the end, I argue this is a fundamental matter underlying the ethics of the distracted screen: the nagging feeling (sometimes fleeting, sometimes persistent) that "something better" could be occupying our time (whatever that might mean); the uncertainty about what it means to live well at all moments; the suspicion that our periods spent with film or television are not "enough." These senses are part and parcel of work/leisure boundary-keeping processes, the goalposts and exact parameters for which are always moving and can never be fully clear. After all, even with the guilt and twitchiness that people may express about not being productive enough, it is also apparent that many of them do not *want* to be productive all the time, and actually desire to maintain some sense of what these work/leisure parameters are.

In this way, questions of managing productive attention/distraction are inseparable from techniques about how to best conduct oneself in accordance with ideas of the good life at different historical moments—to transform oneself "in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 2003a, 146). The conditions of possibility enabled by these techniques allow for moments of leisure away from stresses of productivity (not to be confused with completely resisting or opting-out of those structures), even as the demands of

productivity still remain nearby. One watches (guiltily or not) to temporarily avoid the need to do other things, but this watching always contains the potential to become twitchy the longer it goes on.

Chapter 4

Getting into It: Activity, Passivity, and the Parental Mediation of Attention

Nadine explained to me about how she was able to detect whenever her two children (ages four and seven) were paying "just enough" or "too much" attention to the television. For her, it was not always clear whether kids were being more attentive when they were sitting still or playing around in front of the television.

> **Dan:** If your kids are paying attention to something, how are you able to tell?
>
> **Nadine:** They'd be still.
>
> **Dan:** So you think lack of physical movement is an important part of that?
>
> **Nadine:** Um, well, what I know about both of them is that even when they're moving, they're paying attention, or they're absorbing, at least, and they'll mimic something back to you. Sometimes whole monologues of what happened. But I would know that they were *captivated*. Maybe that's the better word than attentive. They were captured by it.
>
> **Dan:** I'm interested in [how you use images of capture], because that seems to imply to me when I hear it that they are being grabbed hold of in some way…
>
> **Nadine:** Yeah, engrossed. Truly being entertained, maybe? I'm thinking about it in different terms, I know, but, yeah. I don't want to say 'enjoying,' because they're obviously enjoying it if they're dancing around, too. But maybe it is more the visual part, being captured visually, as opposed to hearing a story and participating in it in some way.
>
> **Dan:** This might not apply as much to your kids, but do you think a child can be *too* captivated by what they're watching, or sitting too quietly or something?
>
> **Nadine:** Yes. I think about this when I see observe nieces and nephews who don't blink when watching. Sometimes they're playing a game, or something. But there they're no longer able to participate in something else.

For Nadine, physical stillness was a sign of paying attention, even as talking back to or moving around in front of the screen could indicate a more intense form of engagement or "capture." At the same time, she contrasted the behavior of her kids against those of her nieces and nephews, who sat still in front of screens in ways that suggested excessive levels of capture ("no longer

able to participate in something else"). Nadine saw an upper threshold to screen attention: she wanted her kids to actively engage the TV in some way, but not *too* much. In her role as a parent, she wanted her kids to be captured, but not captive.

This chapter considers these roles of parenting in determining thresholds of home film and television attention—how parents understood acceptable or unacceptable levels of attention that their children should pay toward screens in different situations. I consider how parents evaluated their children's internal attentive states from outward signs, interpreting particular composures, postures, movements, and bodily orientations along unstable binaries of activity or passivity. On one level, this chapter asks how attention is ordinarily read from these sorts of behavioral signs: simply put, how does one *know* when someone else is in attention? More specifically, though, I am interested in how parents, through their attempts to train or manage their kids' watching habits, also anticipate many of the ambiguities in proper attention-giving practices explored in other chapters. In negotiating how their kids should watch (or not watch) the screen with certain intensities, parents are wrestling with larger questions about how to maintain the boundary between "just enough attention" and "too much attention" in how media fit into other everyday routines in the home. This chapter asks: what does it mean to want others to "get into" what they are watching (to dedicate themselves to the screen against other aspects of life), while at the same time hoping they do not get *too* into it (focusing too much or too intensively)?

The chapter draws from interviews in the study I conducted with parents of children ages five to ten. While aspects of this chapter could certainly apply to the cinephile and television-watching groups I discuss elsewhere, I found particular value in discussing these issues with parents. This was because, owing to their roles as mediators of their children's behaviors, parents

tended to be especially self-reflexive about ways of detecting and regulating the screen attention practices of their kids insofar as it was part of their daily routine with them. I interviewed fifteen parents (five men, ten women), ranging in age from thirty to fifty-two, with an average age of thirty-nine. Thirteen were White, one was Latinx, and one identified as mixed race. All but one lived with a partner with whom they shared parenting responsibilities. Like my other subject groups, they were highly educated: all but one had completed at least some four-year college education, and half held a master's degree or higher. They were also had the highest overall incomes of my participant groups, with a median annual income of $60,000 to $75,000. The average age of children being discussed was seven. Five respondents had only one kid, eight had two kids, one had three kids, and one had four kids.

I begin this chapter by outlining several issues in the social detection of attention. I discuss how, despite the fundamental ambiguity about what "attentive" states look like, particular bodily orientations or postures come to be read and marked as attentive or distracted by others. Specifically, the ways parents evaluate postures of attention/distraction are mapped unstably onto other binaries like activity/passivity. Parents may feel ambiguous about whether children's intensive watching practices are signs of "attention" or "distraction"—and, correspondingly, whether to encourage or discourage the child's screen focus in different situations. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to how respondents attempted to manage these binaries in cultivating their children's watching habits. First, I analyze instances where parents encouraged forms of talk, play, or bodily movement as a means of *reducing* the child's screen attention. Next, I examine the opposite case: parents attempting to reduce non-screen-related activity in babysitting or family viewing contexts in order to *increase* the child's attention to the screen. I conclude by considering the fundamental ambivalence pervading the parental mediation

of screens and interpretation of attentive posture: films and TV shows exist at once as desirable points of attention to encourage and distractions to avoid as much as possible.

Given the sheer magnitude of existing discourses about children and media, I find it necessary to note three contours and limitations regarding my goals in this chapter. First, it is important to acknowledge how, although adults may often view childhood as a linear series of developmental ages, stages of life, and fitting styles of parenting, childhood is a socially constructed, historically variable, and contested category (Corsaro 1997; James and Prout 1997; Wyness 2006). Correspondingly, as Lynn Schofield Clark (2011, 330) argues, "the movement from one type of parenting style to another does not happen instantaneously, nor at a certain predefined moment in the lifecourse," but rather is more inconsistent, messy, and staggered. For the purposes of defining my study, I chose to focus on parents of kids ages five to ten. I selected this age range because of its common construction as a middle ground between the early years of development and the later teenage years, a time where parents are encouraged to begin moving toward a greater degree of flexibility while still maintaining a strong mediation and control over much of their kids' routines. Anderson et al. (1979, 337) also contend that children tend to comprehend narratives and sit for longer periods of time with them after the age of five. The 5 to 10 age group was therefore seen as a potentially rich area for study for the parental mediation of attention, since parents largely expected their kids to be *capable* of "paying attention" to media narratives by themselves, even as they still felt a responsibility for overseeing and nurturing this attention.

Second, by focusing on logics of parental mediation, this chapter deals exclusively with the attentional actions of children *as interpreted by* their parents. Since I did not observe or interview any of these children myself, I did not gather their own perspectives about issues

regarding attention, distraction, family time, or screens. This is important to note given the status of childhood as one of the most intensively governed areas of life (Rose 1990, 121), where adult interactions with kids are often premised on some degree of control, instruction, or socialization, even when they are based in pleasure or fun (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, 55). What is less often acknowledged in these discourses is how kids themselves are active, creative, and complete human beings with unique modes of meaning-making that adults often render invisible or inconsequential (James and Prout 1997; Kinder 1999; Livingstone 2002; Projansky 2014). Because my data were filtered entirely through parental constructions of their kids' actions, this chapter deals with the logics and contradictions of these constructions themselves more than with the accuracy of the routines or states to which they refer.

Finally, the chapter deliberately limits its discussion to screens as generalized platforms and displays more than as delivery vehicles for specific content. Much of the discourse surrounding children and media grounds itself in anxieties around particular content, and indeed the parents in my study did discuss their concerns regarding issues like screen violence, pornography, commercialization, objectification of women, bullying, "bad quality" shows, or misinformation flooding into the home. In order to focus in more specific detail on practices of attentiveness, however, I focused my interviews more around questions of posture (in other words, what parents thought about what their kids *did* in front of the screen) than on issues of content exposure or long-term developmental risks.[1] Parents themselves were not always fully clear in how they distinguished between specific contents of concern and more essentialized

[1] For example, I will not be substantially touching on pediatric discourses about perceived links between screens and childhood attention-deficit disorders (ADD or ADHD), where parents may fear that excess screen time (or exposure to certain kinds of screens content) is linked to diminished academic performance or increased hyperactivity (Courage and Setliff 2009; Krcmar 2009, 129; Miller et al. 2007; Shepherd, Arnold, and Gibbs 2006). Here, as Michael Z. Newman (2010, 589) writes, media are taken as holding attention so well that they actually destroy the ability to pay attention in other areas of life. For a detailed study of the shifting cultural understandings of ADHD, see Goodwin (2010). Despite the prominence of ADHD within public discourses on child media attention, the topic did not frequently arise in my own interviews with parents about film or television watching.

notions of what "the screen" did to their kids. (They also did not distinguish meaningfully between cinema and television here, though several held particular media ideologies about the differences between attention to film/TV and mobile technologies.) In terms of attention practices, it is important to see how posture toward the television screen can be generally cultivated as an aspiration onto itself, just as much as (if not more than) it is intended as a response to particular forms of "good" or "bad" content.[2]

Detecting Attentiveness from the Body

Attentiveness is characterized by a certain *outward* ambiguity. As Maggie Jackson (2008, 242, original emphasis) poses the question, "We all know what it feels like to pay attention, to swivel our focus or give a problem our full concentration. But how do we *measure* this essentially invisible process?" What does it mean, in other words, to identify when "attention is happening"—especially when we are describing the experiences of others whose perceptual senses are closed off from us? Does attentiveness gain its meaning from an "interior, hidden, and thus socially inaccessible space, or out in the light of social experience?" (Martin 2007, 232). These questions have animated a recurring challenge for psychological and social researchers on media, as well as audience work conducted by advertisers and the media industries: namely, the difficulty of circumscribing when audiences are *really* paying attention to a screen or not through use of particular visible evidence (Hassoun 2014). In many cases, labeling attention is taken as a process of recognizing gestures—attempting to read the "direction and nature of a person's attention" through reference to catalogs of legible, outward signs involving the orientation of the body or eyes (for example, staring, glancing, sitting, standing, yawning, blinking, and so on)

[2] For a larger discussion about the associations between attention-giving and certain kinds of media content, see my discussion of quality and expectancy in Chapter 2.

(Kendon 2004, 1).

Often, this tends toward a certain definitional rigidity, with physical immobility and visual fixation ("eyes-on-screen") taken as the clearest evidence for screen attention. Other viewing composures and postures, meanwhile, can be taken as *less* attentive the further they appear from this image of the still, forward-facing viewer (listening, for one, is very often de-emphasized in these conversations as a legitimate mode of attention). For example, some of the earliest empirical work on television watching often used recordings or participant observations of how audiences "actually watched" at home—not looking at the screen, moving around, conversing with others nearby, and so on—as clear evidence for how they were not paying close attention, or were distracted (Allen 1965; Bechtel, Achelpohl, and Akers 1972; Krugman, Cameron, and White 1995; Steiner 1966). This continues into more contemporary studies of TV viewing within so-called connected living rooms or new media environments, where use of mobile phones is generally taken as a sign of inattention from the television screen (Papper, Holmes, and Popovich 2004; Pilotta et al. 2004; Schmitt, Woolf, and Anderson 2003). This one-to-one presumption of attentiveness with specific bodily or ocular direction carries through nearly every subfield of film and media scholarship—from gaze theory's construction of the fully attentive film viewer as "all eyes" (Casetti 2011, 3), to ethnographies of home viewing arguing how women are less attentive to TV than men because they are more mobile (Morley 1986), to audience work on the less attentive and "ephemeral" viewing modes engendered by multiscreen environments (Evans, Coughlan, and Coughlan 2017), to neoformalist film scholar Noël Carroll's (2003, 27) assertion that "if the audience is not looking at the screen, then there is no film communication."[3]

[3] Recently, some scientists and psychologists have studied cognitive processing of cinematic continuity editing through use of eye-tracking technologies that measure eye-blinks and follow the subject's points of screen focus

This analytical wedding between attentiveness and visual fixation has been particularly influential among researchers studying child media use. Daniel R. Anderson's foundational studies on attentional development drew from thousands of hours tracking what percentage of time child subjects had their eyes on the screen and how instances of "looking away" correlated with formal or narrative elements onscreen (Anderson et al. 1979; Anderson et al. 1986; Levin and Anderson 1976). Anderson and his team used this visible data for evaluating how children's attentions fluctuated according to interest and comprehension of screen content. One key conclusion was that many kids demonstrated an attentional inertia: the longer they stared, the more intensive their attention could be observed on the body:

> In our viewing room, a child typically looked at the TV for only a short period of time before looking away (54% of all looks were less than 3 seconds long), but if a look continued beyond about 10 seconds, we often observed the child's body relax, head slouch forward, and mouth drop open. This posture might then be maintained continuously for several minutes, ending abruptly as if the child were 'released' by some change on the TV. (Anderson et al. 1979, 340)

As Heather Hendershot (1999) has shown, these models of visible attention-giving were critical for the formation of the Children's Television Workshop (now Sesame Workshop) and the development of programs such as *Sesame Street*. Specifically, programmers wished to cultivate particular types of attentive child viewers by studying what kinds of content attracted the greatest levels of continuous eyes-on-screen time in test settings (157; see also Lesser 1974, 138).

To be clear, I am not faulting these bodies of work as being wrong about how people watch particular screens so much as I am pointing out a common trope in how evidence of so-called real or intensive attentiveness is identified and labeled (my own writing about attention in this project has undoubtedly reproduced this trope at times). To some degree, this is difficult to

---

across shots and within the mise-en-scene (Dwyer et al. 2018; Smith 2012). Though more granular than other observational studies, this work also relies upon a presumed correlation between the positioning of the eyes and states of mental focus in order to make claims about subjects' quality of attention toward different film elements.

avoid in any writing or speaking about attention. As Erving Goffman (1963, 13–14) argued, we often make assumptions about how other people are behaving based on the evidence, attributes, and capabilities they seem to exhibit. These may be purposeful performances that someone "gives" (like trying to demonstrate how focused you are on the film your friend is showing you) or they may be information someone unintentionally or uncontrollably "gives off" (like when your friend interprets you checking your phone as a sign you do not like the movie). Attentiveness, like many elements of the social lifeworld, often involves people's ongoing attempts to position and adjust their attention-signifying behaviors in relation to their perceived norms of the situation (Birnholtz, Davidson, and Li 2017; Hassoun 2015), their relationships to others around them (Citton 2017, 84; Hopkins and Mullins 1985; Lull 1980), and their own idiosyncratic or idiomatic senses of appropriate behavior that they have developed over their lifetimes (Gershon 2010b, 6). In short, determining what attentiveness looks like—what actions signify being in attention with certain degrees of intensity at certain moments—can be a highly relative process without a singular model. Attention could encompass a wide range of contrasting behaviors involving both looking at the screen or not, moving around or sitting still, talking or staying silent.[4]

At the same time, it is important to account for the social impulse for determining consistent and clear signs of attention, both across scholars writing about the topic and (in this chapter's case) parents evaluating how others in the home are watching or not-watching. In my research, parents were often quick to make assumptions about their children's attentions in front of the TV screen based on their watching composures and, subsequently, to evaluate the

[4] As Chapters 1 and 2 detailed, so-called "inner" states of attention are no less ambiguous or difficult to evaluate than outward ones. Chapter 2 refers to this as the "bendability" of attentive experience: attention often fluctuates unpredictably at various moments around poles of engagement and disengagement, making it impossible to state with certainty what absolute attention means.

desirability of that type of attentiveness. This was often part of their sense of accountability for their children's actions, where cultivating proper media-watching behaviors stands as part of a larger responsibility to teach good life skills and invest in the child's social future (Alper 2017, 11; Hoover, Clark, and Alters 2004, 5; Horst 2010, 150; Pugh 2009, 112). In this way, parents often take on regulatory roles of reproducing social values within the home (Donzelot 1979), attempting to adjust their family's behaviors in reference to (often inconsistent) public discourses around child development, screen effects, and proper viewing comportment. Clark (2011) describes this as "parental mediation"—the strategies that parents use to teach their children good media-using skills in order to mitigate the negative effects they believe those media create (see also Livingstone and Helsper 2008; Nathanson 2001; Newman 2010, 593; Vaterlaus and Tulane 2015).

I designed the take-home diary component of my study explicitly to require parents to interrogate and explain these mediatory and evaluatory practices in more detail, in the hope that it would force respondents to specify what kinds of behaviors they marked as attentive or not. Each diary report form requested that parents identify how their kids watched movies and television shows on a given day according to one of four choices, each of which implied an ethical judgment (the options were "My child paid too little attention," "My child paid too much attention," "My child paid just enough attention," and "I'm not sure how I feel"). The form then prompted parents to write a qualitative response explaining their multiple-choice selection, allowing me to follow up in more detail in interviews.

In their viewing diaries, parents identified a litany of behaviors that their children performed that they then could evaluate as attentive or distracted, though, as with my previous three chapters, the boundary lines between these two poles were often ambiguous or slipped in

and out of one another. Specifically, the very same actions that some parents labeled as denoting appropriately attentive behavior could, in other contexts (or sometimes even at the same time) indicate a certain excessive distractedness. Often, these discourses came down to how a parent understood the nature or desirability of their child's *intensity* of visual fixation toward screens relative to other activities. As Cecelia Tichi (1991, 104–105) notes, popular representations of home watching often fall along two, seemingly-opposed discourses—one positioning watchers as "actively engaged," the other seeing them as passive dupes. Tichi sees these two images (one active, one passive) as "irreconcilable," but I contend that they often fall along a spectrum, often arising in reference to precisely the same kinds of watching behaviors. The parents in my study discussed a seemingly paradoxical set of concerns when their kids watched movies and TV. On the one hand, they might wish for their kids to learn how to watch screens appropriately and attentively; on the other hand, they desired that their kids not watch *too* attentively (which many of them actually characterized as a "distraction" onto itself).

Activity and passivity emerged as key terms in these conversations. However, like the evaluation of attentive postures in general, the identification of active versus passive watching behaviors was often unclear and inconsistent (indeed, several parents told me that they were having a hard time figuring out exactly what meanings they were intending in particular contexts). At its core, this confusion seemed to rest on two conflicting foundations: a parent often wished for their kids to be both *attentive* and *active* (which had positive connotations) and not *distracted* and *passive* (which had more negative connotations). These demands could not easily be reconciled, because intensive screen attention was often framed as passive (or "distracting"), while so-called distracted (read: non-screen-related) behaviors were frequently seen as more active. As discussed in this dissertation's introduction, these understandings of

activity and passivity draw from contrasting conceptions of attention that emerged from the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, silent and focused attention was framed as intellectually active, an upwardly-mobile skill to cultivate; on the other hand, attention could be demonized as a passive "distraction," opening the individual to outside influence or manipulation. In discussing their children's attentions, parents, therefore, often tied themselves in definitional knots figuring out how their kids could be attentive without being too passive/distracted.

Take, for instance, this moment in my conversation with Chester. I asked Chester to elaborate what he meant when he described the "glued-in" screen fixation he sometimes observed in his sons, ages nine and six. The discussion grew very confusing as it became less clear whether TV attention was a signifier of *activity* or *passivity*.

> **Dan:** When they're glued in or zombified, as you put it, would you describe them there as being attentive or distracted?
>
> **Chester:** I don't know. It could be both, right? They could be very attentive to what they're doing, but distracted also because they're not doing what I'm asking them to do sometimes.
>
> **Dan:** When they watch things, is that more an active or passive activity?
>
> **Chester:** I'd say passive.
>
> **Dan:** What does that mean for you?
>
> **Chester:** I'd think an active activity would be more, like, you're outside running. More of a physical thing. But I know you can also be mentally active, too.
>
> **Dan:** So do you think watching TV is mentally active?
>
> **Chester:** It can be.
>
> **Dan:** If they're more engaged or attentive to a show, does this mean they are more mentally active with it?
>
> **Chester:** [long pause] From the outside looking in, I would say, depending on the show they're watching…that they're not? I don't know. I haven't thought about it that way.

Dan: If they're engaged with a show, does it mean they're in that zombie mode you described?

Chester: Yeah, yeah.

Dan: Is that more passive?

Chester: I would say yes because you feel like their brain is just sitting there shutting down and they're not actually doing anything, but…You know, you made me think about it…

Dan: Do you think it's possible for them to be very engaged but also passive?

Chester: It's possible… [long pause]

Dan: Is it hard to evaluate a lot of this?

Chester: [pause, laughs] I think so. You don't really know what's going on in their brain when they're sitting there. Are they actually getting involved mentally with what's going on?

Dan: It's hard to know.

Chester: Yeah. They could look a certain way that makes you think they're being attentive, but you don't really know what they might be getting from it.

Chester's immediate inclination was to read his kids' screen attentive posture as relatively passive because he associated it with a sedentary body (unlike truly "active" practices like running). The more his children assumed the position of proper, forward-facing spectatorship, the more passive they appeared to be. At the same time, Chester saw "mental activity" as another potential way of being active. However, since the signs of mental activity were nearly identical to those of physical passivity, he became confused the more he talked about it.

This section examined a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of the social evaluation of screen attention. In the process of affixing meaning to attention, there is a tendency to demarcate a limited set of behaviors and postures as clear indicators of being "in attention." This is particularly prominent among parents, whose roles as moral mediators make them especially

attuned to the attentional practices of their children. However, even as parents attempted to identify specific attentional states from their kids' actions, it was less clear how they should assign value to these behaviors—particularly when it came to determining whether their kids' watching habits were "active" or "passive." The next two sections explore this difficulty in more detail, analyzing the contradictory ways that parents interpreted the same sets of watching practices as, in turn, active or passive (and, correspondingly, as attentive or distracted).

Combatting Passivity: Movement and Talk as Distraction Resistance

In her bestseller *The Plug-In Drug* (first published in 1977), Marie Winn paints children's television watching postures in the image of a submitting mass, which she likens to "zombies."

> Again and again parents describe…the trancelike nature of their children's television watching. The child's facial expression is transformed. The jaw is relaxed and hangs open slightly; the tongue rests on the front teeth (if there are any). The eyes have a glazed, vacuous look. Considering the infinite varieties of children's personalities and behavior patterns, there is a remarkable sameness of expression among television-watching children. They come out of the trance when the program ends or when they must go to the bathroom, and the obvious 'snapping out' effect, as the face resumes a normal expression and the body returns to its normal state of semiperpetual motion, depends on the impression that the mental state of young children watching television is trancelike. There is certainly little indication that they are active and alert mentally. (Winn 2002, 17)

Critics of home media have frequently used these sorts of portraits of trancelike watching to argue that the postures so frequently associated with media engagement are in fact more evidence of mindless "attentional inertia" to the forces of the screen (Healy 1990, 204; Postman 1983). As explored in the introduction of this dissertation, such arguments draw from a longer history of nineteenth and twentieth century fears about mass culture and the protection of individual psychic autonomy and development. These anxieties frequently associate intensive screen fixation with notions of mindlessness, docility, or susceptibility—all concepts that coalesce under the broad heading of "distraction." Passivity stands as an especially operative

term here: media distractions may be readily identified insofar as they *pacify* the mental or physical abilities of the child.

Critical film and media scholars have now asserted for decades that no form of spectatorship is truly "passive" or "unthinking" (see Klinger 2006, 11; Radway 1986, 11; Silverstone 1994, 153–154), a tendency that has deepened as discourses about audiencehood have increasingly shifted from a mass audience to an interactive or participatory one (Jenkins 2006; Livingstone 2003). However, the idea of distracted, stupefied passivity still holds a tremendous amount of explanatory meaning within everyday discussions of viewing practices, particularly when related to children or parenting. Indeed, the vision of active audiencehood put forward by most media and communications research has long been out of step with popular child psychology and "lay theories" of media effects (Seiter 1993, 31, 58). As Hoover, Clark, and Alters (2004, 6) write, images of media passivity or mindlessness may be "a controversial subject in academic circles, but not necessarily in family living rooms," where moral panic discourses about the negative influence of popular culture on kids have held an enduring power across multiple forms of media (see Drotner 1992; Springhall 1998). Beyond concerns about the content of specific movies or programs (which may be elevated or lowered according to perceived sexual, violent, or educational material), families may more often evaluate "screen time" more abstractly, under the assumption that "the media is indeed the message, and the message is undesirable irrespective of content" (Shepherd, Arnold, and Gibbs 2006, 209). Unlike many non-screen-related activities, television watching is commonly presented as a low-level threat that responsible parents must encourage their children against practicing too intensely (Butsch 2000, 263). In these ways, media watching may be framed in everyday terms as something inherently "passive"—in other words, something that damagingly (or at least

frivolously) holds the viewer in mental or physical suspension.

These sorts of value judgments of children's attentional postures and movements rely on both historical and social specificities regarding how children are seen as *supposed* to behave. While Anglo-American discourses of the nineteenth century prized obedience and docility (Seiter 1993, 31), childhood is increasingly framed more as a "time of frenetic activity" against which screen watching interferes or forestalls (Briggs 2006, 447). As with discourses of civil attentiveness discussed above, there is also a prominent class component to these readings of children's bodily posture. Since the earliest studies in the 1960s, researchers have shown that middle- and upper-class parents more frequently hold stronger reservations against their children's TV watching than have lower-income families (Schramm, Lyle, and Parker 1961). Upper-middle-class parents are more likely to privilege leisure times seen as allowing more "self-expression" (Clark 2013, 204–207), while regarding television as a more passive activity to be regarded with suspicion (Notten and Kraaykamp 2010; Vandewater et al. 2005). In this context, screen absorption can connote mindlessness or an erosion of the child's ability to learn self-control and temperance, not dissimilar to discourses about the consumption of fat or sugar (Pugh 2009, 112). These concerns about passive distraction underlie many contemporary parenting discourses' recommendations about minimizing children's screen time. If access to leisure technologies once required relative wealth and privilege to seek out and perfect one's conduct around, it can now be seen as a greater display of cultivation to *avoid* the products of the culture industries (Highmore 2011, 115; Portwood-Stacer 2013). This can take the form of structured periods of family abstention from certain forms of "media distractions" with the goal of living more mindfully—what Amy Nathanson (2001) refers to as "restrictive mediation" practices. These abstentions can be evocatively referred to in terms of media "detoxes," "diets,"

or “Sabbaths” (Brabazon 2013; Powers 2010, 227; Sutton 2017).

Most of the parents I interviewed reported at least some restrictions on their kids’ daily screen time, including mobile phone or tablet use as well as film or TV watching (only four did not report any formal restrictions at all). More important than the specifics of each parent’s media rules, however, was the consistency with which most of them wished their children would not get “too into” the content they watched, therefore avoiding the trance-like qualities of spectatorship described above. These sentiments were rarely made as “rigorous” academic arguments about media effects; rather, they arose from a general, straightforward sense that screens could be pacifying and damaging if children did not learn to place boundaries on their intensity of engagement with them. These cautions against over-absorption also did not necessarily relate to concerns about specific media content. Rather, like the discourses of cultivated screen attention discussed above, the ability to detach oneself from screen distractions was framed as a generalizable mode of comportment—only this discourse aimed to generally shift the child’s bodily orientation *away* from the screen rather than perfecting their screen posture *as* they watched.

Ronette, for instance, did not have explicit media watching restrictions in place for her eight-year-old daughter. However, when she felt that her daughter was becoming too absorbed by time with the television or her laptop, Ronette would occasionally initiate impromptu “Brain Camps” where family members had to turn off screens and pull out books to read instead.

> **Dan:** Do you have any informal policies? You mentioned earlier how you thought she watched ‘too much.’ If she is getting to a point where you think she has watched too much, do you address that at all?
>
> **Ronette:** At a certain point, yeah. I’ll tell her to read at certain times of the day. She’ll shut it off and we’ll do something called ‘Brain Camp’ where I try to get the whole house, my husband, too, to turn off their screens and read. It can be hard because my [19-year-old] son might be using his laptop to study. The rest of us don’t use our screens to study,

> but we may still read things online, so we use our devices to read. So during Brain Time, I say that everyone has to shut their screens even if they're doing work, because we're trying to model getting a book out instead.

Ronette hoped that switching from the screen to the book would not only help her daughter learn how to read more (which Ronette regarded as more mentally rigorous than watching electronic screen content), but also model for her how not to get too into her screen content for too long. Nancy similarly framed this concern in terms of her kids' (ages seven, six, and four) abilities to self-regulate when watching. Although all her kids dutifully observed a daily, twenty-minute "tablet time" allotment for using mobile devices, Nancy had a more difficult time getting them to turn off the television on their own.

> **Dan:** How important is it to you now that your kids can regulate their own attention as they're watching things?
>
> **Nancy:** Not important enough. I should start working on slowly teaching them how to regulate. I just don't know what age.
>
> **Dan:** Is this something you were thinking very actively about before the study?
>
> **Nancy:** No. I was wondering when doing this at what point will they be able to turn the TV off on their own? And how will I ever help them do that? Like, I don't know at what age development-wise they could start to learn that skill. Something to think about.
>
> **Dan:** Would you say this is something you're thinking a lot about now, or is this something that just kind of happens?
>
> **Nancy:** I guess, yeah, in my mind, I just think, 'Nah, they're too young now.' But I don't know if that will change naturally as our lives and schedules change. But right now their self-regulation is based on tablet time, which they know is twenty minutes. My oldest will actually set a timer on the stove.
>
> **Dan:** But that kind of self-limiting hasn't carried over to TV or movies yet.
>
> **Nancy:** No. I'm always the one who turns those off. Maybe that's just my inconsistency. Sometimes they get two shows. Sometimes they get four, if my exercising or showering takes longer than I expected. They're probably thinking, 'Sweet! Let's see how long we can go before she shuts it off!'

Evelyn made a similar observation, recounting instances where she deliberately had her daughter

(age five) sit with her back to screens while she ate meals, so that she would remain present with the rest of the family rather than being captured by outside content. Evelyn made it clear that she hoped these kinds of self-limitations would become more self-guided as her daughter aged.

> **Dan:** If she were older, like 12, would you have let her watch?
>
> **Evelyn:** I probably still would've chided her, like 'don't watch the screen!'
>
> **Dan:** What about 15 or 18?
>
> **Evelyn:** By the time she's older, I probably wouldn't say anything because she needs to self-regulate and make her own choices at a certain point, but I would still not want her to pay attention. Even I'm easily distracted after all. Sometimes there are screens on and I'll watch.

Across these statements by Ronette, Nancy, and Evelyn, we can glimpse a general parenting sense about how proper self-regulation around screens is linked to children learning to avoid excessive screen engagement altogether. Specifically, there exists a sense that kids should learn to willfully detach themselves from attending to screens as they get older, lest they become too distracted by the media around them. Their postures of attentiveness were best when they were temporary and had the potential of ceasing.

Many respondents framed their desire for a willfully detached screen posture in some idea of "activeness," telling me that they wished their kids played or moved around more (either in general or during screen time, specifically). Moving in front of the TV could serve as proof that their kids could be more active—with "active" linked to physical activity and "passive" linked to motionlessness. This binary was not always consistent: for instance, Tammy (two sons, ages eight and three) believed books to be a more active medium than television or movies, even though book-reading could be an even more sedentary practice than screen watching

(correspondingly, no parent reported concern that their kids were reading too much).[5] What seemed particular to electronic media was the degree to which parents were willing to read physical immobility as also correlated with mental passivity.

Dan: Is it possible for them to watch too much TV?

Tammy: Oh yeah.

Dan: So there's a clear distinction there.

Tammy: Yeah.

Dan: Why? Where does the distinction come from?

Tammy: For me, I think when they're reading, their mind is working more. Their imagination is more progress [inaudible]. But TV is more of a passive activity. Yeah.

Dan: Can TV watching be an active activity?

Tammy: I think it's pretty much always passive.

Dan: If he starts playing around or doing something else halfway through the show or he's not paying full attention to it, is that him being more active while watching?

Tammy: Being more active while watching?

Dan: Does that make sense?

Tammy: Yeah, I'd think so, since he isn't focusing on the screen entirely.

Sally (two sons, ages nine and six) held a similar position. For her, "being active" with the television seemed to be directly correlated to how much one was *not* literally watching it, or how one was able to combine the television with other things.

Sally: Typically, when you think of watching TV, I think of it as a passive thing.

Dan: Is it the sitting?

[5] As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, these hierarchies of value between, for example, television and books were based less on any intrinsic properties of each medium. Rather, they were rooted more in (a) how each medium was framed as "deserving" of time based on its connotations of gender, class, or educational level, and (b) the media ideologies that people brought to what they saw as the most appropriate ways of using each medium.

Sally: Yes.

Dan: What if you are sitting and on your tablet while the TV is on? Or you're doing chores?

Sally: I guess I'm defining passive as sedentary and I see active as being more physically active and mobile and actually doing something.

Dan: So if you are sedentary, you are more passive.

Sally: Yes.

Dan: Would you prefer that your kids be more active while watching TV?

Sally: Yeah, maybe.

Dan: I'm asking because I keep thinking of this idea of absorption. I'm wondering, if they're crossing over from absorption to over-absorption, does it have anything to do with the fact they they're sitting or sitting for too long?

Sally: I think it's more how they're engaging with other things around them.

For both Tammy and Sally, the more their boys played or moved around while the television was on—oscillating their attentions between the screen and their surrounding environment—the more active they were being. Nancy phrased this in terms of a binary of "inputs" versus "outputs." She told me she was concerned that screens only provided inputs. If her children did other activities while the TV played, their postures reassured her that they were still displaying some of their own "outputs."

Nancy: I'm responsible for the children [laughs], so I guess I feel it's unhealthy somewhat to be so all input/no output.

Dan: So the input requires a little bit of output for you.

Nancy: Yeah. It evokes my fears of mindless gaming and things like that. It just triggers, like 'red flag!' It just evokes that.

Dan: When you're talking about feedback or output that you like to see, does this only include talking? What if they're moving around or they're playing…

Nancy: Which they will do.

Dan: Is that acceptable, too?

Nancy: Yeah. As long as it's constructive, not hitting each other. They pulled out Legos yesterday during their second show, and I'm fine with that.

When the television was framed as inherently pacifying, as suspending their kids from more supposedly creative practices or physical play, it potentially became a sign of *less* passivity when their children interrupted their own watching sessions to do other things (even if those things had little or no obvious correlation with the content on the screen).

Not all respondents saw watching as inherently passive in the way that Tammy or Sally discussed. For example, Selena (like Chester above) saw her seven-year-old daughter's posture as evidencing both active and passive modes of attentiveness at different times. Selena explained to me how she distinguished between more "engaged" watching postures, which positively signaled that her daughter was empathetically connecting to characters onscreen, and "distracted" watching, which suggested a more negative, "zombie-ish" passivity. Selena said she used her ability to detect these modes of attentiveness to evaluate how much media time her child was permitted (she was only allowed to stream programs through a laptop at home under specifically delimited conditions each day).

Dan: Do you notice a difference if she's watching for the first time versus rewatching?

Selena: I think she tuned in more, to be sure. Just in the last few days, she was watching, captivated, and her whole body was just hanging limp, just watching. That's kind of unusual of her, to be body limp and really focused in that way. She's usually fidgeting and moving a lot. She's on a spinning stool and she's usually spinning on it. She's always moving while she's watching.

Dan: Would you prefer that she fidgets and moves while watching or would you prefer that she sit still?

Selena: Oh, I prefer that she moves around, even though it drives me crazy. [laughs]

Dan: Why?

Selena: The sound of the stool. [laughs] No, because it's just intuition on my part. I just understand that she's more engaged. When her whole body is engaged with her brain at the same time, it's better.

Dan: So it's part of the processing.

Selena: For sure, yes.

Dan: Would you be concerned if she were consistently sitting limp and watching?

Selena: Yes.

Dan: Why?

Selena: I think I would be much more hesitant about her watching, because then it seems so much more passive to me. I understand there are moments when they might mean she's more focused, but for this particular child, the way I know her, it would alarm me if she were at rest.

Dan: Just knowing that's she's usually more active.

Selena: Right.

Dan: And when you say 'active'…Would you say that 'active viewing' means that you're doing other things in front of the screen?

Selena: To some extent. I'd just say that her body looked like she had some posture that showed that she was experiencing empathetically or was in some way charged by watching, rather than…You know, if she wasn't responding at all, I don't know what value the show would even have.

For Selena, her daughter's fidgets and physical motions served as evidence of mental activity (a "processing activity," as she explained elsewhere), while "hanging limp" indicated a more troubling passivity. The limper (more "captivated") that her daughter appeared in front of the screen, the more hesitant Selena felt about permitting her time with it. To some extent, Selena seemed to base this off of what she knew about her child's behavioral inclinations (she said that it was "uncharacteristic" of her daughter to simply sit in one spot for long periods for anything). At the same time, though, it became clear that part of Selena's acceptance of her child's more

frenetic watching habits (like her constantly rotating on her stool as she sat) was based on a perception that it shielded her from watching *too* attentively. Conducting at least some simultaneous activity or motion outside the full capture of the program—in other word, not watching fully—could paradoxically indicate a more mindful watching.

These approvals of physical motions as forms of distraction-resistance could also carry over to practices of talking while the screen was on. As Nancy explained, complete quietness while watching could be a symptom of mindlessness just as much as physical sedentariness (unless it was nighttime and her kids were already really tired).

> **Dan:** Would you prefer if your kids sat quietly and never really talked while watching things?
>
> **Nancy:** No, I would be worried.
>
> **Dan:** Why?
>
> **Nancy:** I guess I feel l like that would be a shutdown, like a mindless…uh… [laughs] Why *would* I worry? I guess I don't like the idea of mindless slugs on a couch.
>
> **Dan:** And them sitting too quietly is a signal of that for you?
>
> **Nancy:** Unless I know they're really tired. Like, if they're close to a nap, I know they're just going to slowly fade away or partially be there.

In this context, parents sometimes interpreted their children talking during their screen time as evidence that how they were still mentally active. Tichi (1991, 110) discusses how forms of "backtalk" (people talking back, arguing with, or making fun of what they see or hear on TV) have long been taken as a form of resistance to notions of brainwashed or passive audiencehood. In her work on children's home television viewing, Patricia Palmer (1986, 54–55, 69–90) similarly used practices of children talking back to programs or interacting with parents or siblings nearby as evidence for how kids were a "lively" audience rather than a purely distracted one. While some of my respondents spoke about their children's tendencies to talk parasocially

to characters onscreen, they were actually more likely to interpret moments when the kids talked about something *unrelated* to the screen as holding some resistive potential. For instance, Judy (one daughter, age five) explained how she was somewhat encouraged by instances when her child started asking questions or chatting about things completely irrelevant to her programs.

> **Dan:** Does she ever talk while the TV is on?
>
> **Judy:** She'll sing along sometimes. [*Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, Disney, 2006–2016] is educational and they'll have things on the TV for her to pick out. So that's sort of interactive, where she's really learning.
>
> **Dan:** So she might talk to the screen. Does she talk to anyone else?
>
> **Judy:** Yeah, if I'm in the room with her, she'll look to me like, 'Was that the right one?' or 'What do you think?'
>
> **Dan:** So stuff related to the TV. Does she ever talk about things unrelated to the TV?
>
> **Judy:** Yeah, if she's hungry or needs to go to the bathroom. [laughs]
>
> **Dan:** Would you prefer that she just watch or are you okay with her asking things?
>
> **Judy:** Oh, I would much rather she be able to ask questions. That lets me know that she's still using her mind while this television's on. That it's not consuming her every thought.
>
> **Dan:** So if she's quiet, would that be an indication that she's not thinking as much?
>
> **Judy:** I don't know if she's not thinking or if she's just absorbing more of what's going on on the television.
>
> **Dan:** But if she's talking to you about something else, that's an indication that she's not absorbing everything on screen.
>
> **Judy:** Yeah. When she's talking to me and not watching the TV, I would say that, if she's talking about something different, that means other thoughts have popped into her head.
>
> **Dan:** Can you tell when she's thinking about other things?
>
> **Judy:** Not if she's staring at it, no. But if she talks to me, that's a sign that she might be.

For Judy, her daughter's verbalizations were valuable as proof of how she was "still using her

mind." If she began talking to Judy about matters unrelated to the show, it meant that the screen was not "consuming her every thought," and that her attentiveness did not necessarily signal mental passivity. Without such indications that the child was at least partially not-watching, parents could not always be sure how to interpret their children's stares at the screen.

Although parents often spoke in broad terms about forms of passive/distracted watching (referring generally to what kinds of behaviors or postures signaled passivity), they nonetheless tended to base these perceptions on situational factors. This emerged most compellingly in many viewing diaries and follow-up diaries: by calling media a "distraction" in specific instances, parents were often indicating a preference for their children's attention to be somewhere else at a particular point just as much as they were expressing a concern with watching postures per se. This was clearest in cases when parents felt that they were unreasonably competing against a screen for their kids' attentions. Clark (2011, 325) refers to this as "problems of co-presence": parents may feel that their kids are paying more attention to their screen media than to those in the same room as them. Selena explained this as an issue of "social-spatial awareness": the more her daughter focused on the screen, the more she "missed out on those cues and body language in real time that she has to participate in."

> **Selena:** I feel like…I've never put this into words before. Because the experience is two-dimensional, as rich as it can be. It still has limits and it's so tantalizing, like candy. I feel like it takes away her understanding of her own body. It's weird but that's my first instinct. It messes up her relationship to her own body and other people's rhythms in three-dimensional space. That can be ruined when you're tuned into the TV. You're tuning out all the dimensions of the actual world you're living in. It's like an embodiment problem or something. I don't know.

These problems of co-presence depended on how entertainment media constantly interacted with (or disrupted) the proceeding of other household routines, such as meal times, chores, or preparing to leave the home. For example, Judy told me how she often allowed her five-year-old

to watch TV shows while eating breakfast before school, but was frustrated when her daughter frequently became so "engrossed" that she was unable to get ready to leave on time.

> **Dan:** You wrote sometimes there are conflicts in the morning when she's getting ready and she's watching *Mickey Mouse Club*[*house*] or something like that. What do you mean by that? What was the conflict?
>
> **Judy:** She won't want to put on her clothes or brush her teeth or get up from the couch. She just wants to sit there. I can get her to eat her breakfast while she's watching the television. For her, I think it all runs together. There's barely a commercial in between. To her, the show isn't ever over. That's why I have to shut the TV off. Otherwise I couldn't get her to brush her teeth or put her clothes on.
>
> **Dan:** And this is because she's attentive to the TV. Or would you describe that as distracted?
>
> **Judy:** I guess a little bit of both.
>
> **Dan:** How so?
>
> **Judy:** She's drawn in, it gets her attention, but she's still distracted. It gets her attention. She actually wants to go to school. She loves school, and so it distracts her from the morning routine, when I've made it a part of the routine because she needs a little bit of time to wake up. I try to wake her up in the morning and leave the TV off or just put some music on, and she'll just want to go back to sleep. So I found it useful. She can sit there for thirty minutes and have her cereal or oatmeal, as long as she turns it off on time. And she's fine with that.
>
> **Dan:** Do you tell her to start getting ready at some point during the show, or is it only once the show's off?
>
> **Judy:** I stopped during that. I was trying to let her watch two episodes of it [initially], but she would keep watching it: 'No, it's still on! No, it's still on!' So I started turning the TV off.

For Judy, the usefulness of the television as a tool for drawing her child out of bed in the morning had to be balanced against the potential of the screen interrupting the flow of expected practices before leaving the house. Attentiveness to the TV, even as it helped affix the child's behaviors to some parts of the morning routine, threatened to "distract" her from others. Chester described a similar situation when he had trouble getting his two sons to eat dinner in front of the

TV in the evening, a problem he also attributed to the TV's ability to interfere with extra-screenic awareness.

> **Dan:** Is it possible for them to pay too much attention to what they watch?
>
> **Chester:** I think so. They can be zombie-fied by the TV. If they've been watching for an hour, you can tell. They just sit there with a blank stare, you know, concentrating on whatever they're doing.
>
> **Dan:** And how does that differ from them just paying attention? Is it different?
>
> **Chester:** I don't know. I've never really thought about this. It's just that if they've watched long enough, they're sucked into whatever they're doing. Because when they're just regularly watching, they realize there's still a world going on around them. Sometimes it feels like they might be in a bubble in paying attention to their tablet or the TV and not have any awareness of what's going on around them.
>
> **Dan:** So it has something to do with their awareness of things besides the TV.
>
> **Chester:** I think so. Sometimes if they've been sitting and watching while I've been making dinner, I can come in and I'll set a plate down or whatever and one of them will say, 'I'm hungry,' and I'll be like, 'You have a plate sitting right there.' They have no awareness of their surroundings because they're just glued to their tablet or their TV.
>
> **Dan:** And that's too much attention for you?
>
> **Chester:** I think so. That's the time when I'll tell them to take a break because they're too involved.

Notably, both Judy and Chester described directly intervening in their children's watching in these instances (turning the TV off, telling them to take a break) in order to reorient their focus back to the needs of the household. Multiple parents mentioned similar strategies, including physically waving their hands in front of the kids' eyes, commanding their kids with "eyes on me," raising their voice, and standing in front of the set to block the child's view. One mother even said she employed a small bell to sometimes distract her daughters from the TV distraction.

This section looked at several ways that parents interpreted types of movement or talk as forms of distraction resistance. When respondents took silence or physical stillness as signs of

spectatorial passivity, they then were more likely to see instances of fidgeting, dancing, playing, or chatter as ways for their children to be more "active" viewers without falling into so-called distraction. Sometimes, these judgments of distractedness were based on physical posture itself. Other times, they arose from how the child's activities (or lack thereof) signaled their degree of co-present awareness with other routines in the household. Importantly, even though parents described specific times of directly intervening into their children's watching to turn off the screen or redirect their focus, more often parents wished for their kids to balance these forms of watching/not-watching *as they watched.* In effect these parents desired watching composures where someone could simultaneously be seen as attentive without being *too* distracted. The next and final section considers the other side of these constructions of good watching composure: moments when parents actually attempted to quell or minimize their kids' extra-screenic behaviors in order to encourage their closer attention *toward* the screen. At the same time that respondents stated that they wanted their kids to stop paying so much attention to screens, there were other ways in which they still held a sense of the importance (or usefulness) of actually fostering this attentive posture in many situations.

Staying Put?: Encouraging Closer Screen Attention

Harold (two children, ages one and five) described to me how, in spite of his desire for his older daughter to be "active," he still wished she would sit and watch more silently and attentively at times.

> **Dan:** How would you prefer that [your five-year-old daughter] watches, if you had an ideal setup?
>
> **Harold:** Like, she would watch in the living room, sitting on the couch at some sort of distance from the TV. We never give her a tablet or TV screen.

Dan: Would you prefer that she sits quietly and watches or would you prefer her to do other things while the TV plays?

Harold: Um. Yeah, I think I'd prefer her to sit quietly and kind of watch.

Dan: [In the viewing diary] She watched *Sophia the First* [Disney 2012–2018] on June 8. You wrote that she paid just enough attention, that 'as usual she watched attentively, but responded to her surroundings.' I'm curious about the word 'but' in that sentence. First of all, if she's responding to her surroundings, what does that mean?

Harold: She has a little brother and he might be running around the living room sometimes when she watches TV. If he's there and she's not watching 100 percent, she might take him and put him on her lap or throw him a toy, that kind of thing. If we're getting ready to leave and she's watching, I might ask her to put her shoes on and she'll do that while still watching the TV. So stuff like that.

Dan: So all of that is her 'responding to her surroundings.' Do you think that's separate from her paying attention to the show? Again, I was curious about the 'but' in your sentence. You said, 'she was watching attentively, *but* she was responding to surroundings.'

Harold: She might have those days where she's jumping and running around to do things while watching TV and she would not be responding, but then there are those instances where she'll be watching but still be able to do something else and still participate in stuff happening around the house while doing that.

Harold's comments suggest two interlocking, yet seemingly opposite demands. Even as Harold wished for his daughter to "respond to her surroundings" as she watched, he still stated that he preferred for "her to sit quietly and kind of watch." This sort of wish for more intensive or docile attentiveness arose most frequently in relation to two different situations: babysitting contexts (where parents saw the screen as a tool for temporarily pacifying their kids) and group viewing contexts (when attentiveness signaled a more active participation within the family).

Babysitting

Dale told me how his two sons (ages ten and twelve) were frequently "locked into" whatever they watched, not responding to surrounding social cues or refusing to pause their entertainment to go to the bathroom for long stretches of time. To combat this, Dale often encouraged them to

talk over movies and TV shows, saying that when they commented on elements of the texts, it was a sign they were "really engaging" with them rather than "just sitting there mindlessly." At the same time, Dale confessed to times when he wished his kids would watch in a more docile manner, where the TV could suspend their peripheral behaviors *more* rather than less.

> **Dale:** Like I said, it's a pretty interactive experience with us when the kids watch things. I can hear them talking about it, so I know they're engaging with it.
>
> **Dan:** Are there any situations where your kids are watching, either with you or by themselves, where they're starting to misbehave, and you just tell them to stop doing what they're doing and 'just watch?'
>
> **Dale:** Yes, I've done that. They'll poke each other or something like that, and it escalates from there.
>
> **Dan:** And so you tell them, 'time out?'
>
> **Dale:** Right. 'Guys, just pay attention to the show instead of needling each other.' I have done that. Which seems weird, doesn't it? 'Just pay attention to the big screen in front of you rather than to each other.' [laughs]

For Dale, the acceptability of peripheral activity or chatter while watching fell away in moments when such activities crossed into annoying misbehaviors. When the siblings began to fight, the television's supposedly distracting properties—its ability to hold attentive posture at the expense of other things—became potentially useful.

Dale's case was more reactive (redirecting the kids to focus on the screen as misbehaviors arose), but other respondents talked about screen distraction more proactively, treating it as a way to babysit or preoccupy the kids while the adults did other things. In these instances, some of the evaluations of "distraction" changed: it was still a sign of passivity, perhaps even mindlessness, but rather than a purely negative state, it could be a desirable one—at least for a time or in measured amounts. Parents often admitted to the difficulty of fully disavowing modes of distracted (or overly attentive) watching even as they believed in their

dangers (Evans, Jordan, and Horner 2011; Gadberry 1974; Gantz and Masland 1986). By attracting the children's attention to a movie or TV show, the screen enabled the parent to take a break or "look after them in a way commensurate with her limited time" (Mackay and Ivey 2004, 75; see also Seiter 1993; Tussey 2018, 166). Especially for single parents or parents (particularly mothers) laboring inside the home, the ability to distract the child was undeniably useful.

These judgments of useful distraction tended to be circumstantial rather than firmly categorical, arising in the moment when parents found themselves wanting or needing to occupy the kids for a period of time. For instance, in her diary, Rebecca readily drew upon the imagery of zombie-like distractedness to describe a situation during her diary period when some of her friends came to her house and brought their own children. Rebecca reported turning to movies and TV shows as an ad hoc strategy for occupying her daughter and the additional kids as the adults tried to talk in a separate room.

> **Dan:** On this day, you said that after *Sleeping Beauty* [dir. Clyde Geronimi, 1959], there was *Shrek* [dir. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001], there were a couple *Wonder Woman* cartoons. You said that [your daughter] didn't really pay attention to these either, but…
>
> **Rebecca:** There were other kids in the room.
>
> **Dan:** And these things were on to distract the other kids.
>
> **Rebecca:** Yes. We had some friends over and their kids are a bit younger and don't listen at all! Marking all over the wall while they talk to you! I don't like to say this, but I couldn't stand them! So I turned on the TV to try and distract them and [my daughter] was paying more attention to what the kids were doing because she didn't want them touching her stuff.
>
> **Dan:** Would you have preferred they just be zoned out?
>
> **Rebecca:** The other kids? *Yes*! Just pay attention to something and calm down!
>
> **Dan:** What about [your daughter]?
>
> **Rebecca:** In that instance, it didn't bother me at all if she had been zoned out. Because

she was more focused on them than the show. And she knew the TV was on to distract them.

Dan: Were they successfully distracted?

Rebecca: No. It was maybe ten minutes, but then they'd get up. One of them snuck paint and painted the inside of the closet. One of them took a marker and started marking on the mattress. One of them was taking the girls' dolls and breaking off their heads. These children were nightmares! I would've preferred that they just sit down and be zombies, to not do anything. Zone out, please! [laughs]

Despite Rebecca's hesitations about the trancelike embodiments of TV attention elsewhere in her interviews, she could seize upon these very qualities as a method of trying to calm people down. It was not uncommon for parents to retreat slightly from their earlier condemnations of screen distraction when they saw such distractions as serving a utilitarian function. For example, Evelyn said that she and her husband had gotten rid of their home television years ago, partly out of concern about its presence when their eldest daughter was an infant. Now that her daughter was five, however, Evelyn admitted it was sometimes convenient for a child's attention to be "entirely absorbed" in a screen so that she "can do things as if the kid wasn't there." For this reason, she occasionally let her daughter stream programs on the family's desktop computer, especially when she needed to tend to her newborn one-year-old son.

Dan: You mentioned screen time as a babysitter at the beginning. Do you ever use the desktop computer as a babysitting device if you absolutely need to?

Evelyn: I mean, I have, for sure.

Dan: What are those situations like?

Evelyn: When [my son] was much younger and I really needed to help him with whatever, diaper, screaming, and maybe she had a need that I couldn't attend to at that point. Like if she's hungry for lunch and she wants it right *now* and I can't feed her lunch right now and feed him at the same time. So I might put it on for her to delay attending to her need because I could get him fed and then turn it off and give her some food.

Dan: So it would basically be just to buy time.

Evelyn: Just to buy time. [laughs] I've absolutely used it to buy time sometimes.

Dan: If she is zoned out or glued in, in that kind of situation where you're trying to buy time, is that positive or negative?

Evelyn: I try to limit her time enough that if I do [allow her to watch]. I mean, that kind of situation for me is probably no more than once a month. Yeah.

Dan: So that's acceptable?

Evelyn: Yeah, it probably isn't harmful if it's only so often. Sometimes she just watches *Mr. Rogers* clips or something like that.

For Evelyn and others, screen time could serve as an "easy distraction" (as one father phrased it), a method of holding the child in suspension from other aspects of home life. The irony was not lost on many parents that they were sometimes encouraging their kids to practice the very kinds of attentive postures that they, in other circumstances, frowned upon. Parents relied on TV content as a necessary tool for holding the kids at bay; however, they were troubled when the screen distracted the child *too* much from the life flows of the home. Selena, for example, told me that, as a single mom working two jobs, she saw the TV's babysitting abilities as a "lifesaver," especially in the morning when she needed to get ready to leave for work. At the same time, she was frustrated by how her daughter often became so distracted by the TV that she "tuned everything else out" and neglected to eat breakfast or get ready on time. The screen was helpful for separating the child from other aspects of everyday life for a time, but only insofar as the demands of everyday routine could still make their way in when needed.

To navigate this boundary between "necessary distraction" and "too much distraction," parents often emphasized some idea of *temporariness*. As seen in Evelyn's comment above, the screen distraction was acceptable so long as it was impermanent and non-habitual. Even though babysitting distractions were still seen as "passive," stopping the child from other physical activity or supposedly creative pursuits, they could be acceptable so long as they were occasional,

rare, or short-lived. Nancy, for instance, said that she disagreed with using screens as babysitters since it detracted from a strong sense of family co-presence. Nevertheless, as a stay at home mom, she sometimes wished that the TV would arrest her kid's proclivities for side activity while she tried to shower or do chores.

> **Dan:** Do you ever wish your kids were paying more attention to the things they're watching?
>
> **Nancy:** Sometimes, yeah, if I'm trying to get stuff done.
>
> **Dan:** And you want them to just occupy themselves?
>
> **Nancy:** Yeah.
>
> **Dan:** Do you ever tell them to pay more attention to what they're watching?
>
> **Nancy:** I wouldn't say that, but I'd say, like, 'go watch your show.' Like, I'm going to take a shower. Watch a show so I know you're not going to go out and dig in the dirt. Which is a great thing. I'm all about digging in the dirt, but not while I'm in the shower. So, yeah, I'll redirect their attention to the show.

Nancy's comments negotiated a fine line between a desire for activity and the convenience of passivity—what Ellen Seiter (1993, 26) describes as the precarious balance between the need for "free time" and the "job of censoring, monitoring, and accompanying the child's viewing." By consigning screen distraction to the realm of the occasional, Nancy was able to simultaneously voice her support for creative, non-screenic play (like digging in the dirt) while also attempting to hold off that type of play at select moments. In this way, the *inability* to distract the child could actually become a more immediate annoyance than the mindlessness that distraction was seen as engendering. A couple of parents, like Nadine, even bemoaned the ineffectiveness of the TV to distract their kids reliably.

> **Dan:** When you ask them if they wanted to do something, is that, as you said before, is that because you usually want to park them in front of something while you do something else?

Nadine: They will. But it's not a good babysitter to them.

Dan: Has it ever been?

Nadine: Not really. They just don't work like that.

Dan: What does it mean to babysit with a TV?

Nadine: They will sit there and not kill themselves or burn my house down while watching something. They would be so enraptured by what they're watching that they'd be sitting there, you know, just mouth agape and drooling. That's what I would *love*. I see other people who are able to get that. I'll be like, 'You mean you just parked your kids and for two hours they didn't move and they just watched that thing?'

Dan: But that doesn't tend to work out for you.

Nadine: Never worked for us. Never.

The hypothetical ability of the screen to act as a "good babysitter" hinged on its ability to so "enrapture" the kids that they would be "parked" in front of its glare, temporarily separated from the parents' routines. The value of the screen, in other words, lay in its ability to encourage habits that were *not* "active."

Family Media Time

At the same time that parents encouraged closer screen attention to temporarily separate their kids from household flows, they could also use attentiveness as a pro-social way of incorporating the child *within* family routines in other situations. This was most prominent during times when the entire family gathered to watch a film or TV show together, especially on weekends or at the end of the day. Here, watching functioned less as a babysitting tool to entertain individuals and more as a social activity that could construct and reinforce notions of "family togetherness" or "quality time" (Holloway and Green 2008, 53; Jones 2013, 302; Livingstone 2002, 184). Achieving this sense of screen time as a common activity often relied upon some degree of sustained attentiveness. In order to maintain this, parents drew from notions of screen attention

as a form of good manners—attempting to minimize occurrences or disruptions outside the screen similar to the methods of attentional maintenance discussed in Chapter 1.

Here, there was often an explicit attempt to mark attentive posture as a form of etiquette befitting the social situation *and*, correspondingly, as a sign of the child's maturity level. All of the parents I interviewed affirmed the importance of their children behaving attentively in movie theaters, explaining how "they need to sit down and be quiet because we're with other people" because "that's the norm." No parents cared as much about the consistency of such modes of watching at home. However, even in this more relaxed watching environment, attentiveness could still serve as evidence of greater maturity—a sense that children ought to overall learn how to control themselves and watch media content more patiently and deliberately as they got older. This idea arose most clearly in the moments when parents seemed to regard distractibility as somewhat synonymous with misbehavior or attentiveness as an indication of growing up. Nick, for instance, attributed his eight-year-old son's distractibility in previous years to the fact that he could not fully comprehend or process much of what he was watching. As his comprehension matured, so, too, would his attentiveness.

> **Dan:** Has he always watched things with this level of focus or did he grow into it?
>
> **Nick:** It's grown over the last few years. He's become more focused. I also remember taking him to the theater the first couple of times and he got bored sitting in the same spot for a few hours. So, yeah, when he was younger he'd play with toys more frequently at home. The first movie I ever took him to, he tried to go lay down in the aisle. 'Okay, we're going home.' We didn't see the end of the movie because he made me leave.
>
> **Dan:** Would he talk or move around more?
>
> **Nick:** Yeah, his focus would waver.
>
> **Dan:** When he was younger, would you describe him as a distracted viewer?
>
> **Nick:** Yes.

Dan: So he's grown into his attentiveness over time?

Nick: Right.

Dan: What do you think about that?

Nick: I don't know. It could be from multiple things. I don't know if his patience grew for sitting around or if the level of understanding he has for what's going on has grown, so he was able to fully follow along.

Dan: So you think his attentiveness might be linked to how well he's able to comprehend what he's watching?

Nick: Possibly. That comes to mind, because previously he would only watch for a little while.

Another parent, Rebecca, made a similar observation about her ten-year-old daughter's tendency to talk and ask lots of questions when she watched movies (a practice I explore in more detail further below). According to the schema of attentiveness that Rebecca understood, her daughter could not be fully attentive until she grew up enough to learn to be quieter. Along this line, Rebecca treated the idea of her daughter continuing to ask questions excessively into her teenage years as potential evidence of an underlying attention disorder.

Dan: So you think as she gets older, she'll ask fewer questions.

Rebecca: She'll pay better attention and follow along with the story.

Dan: Is it a matter of her not following along?

Rebecca: Yeah, because she doesn't pay attention. [laughs] Like, she'll ask me a question and they just answered that! 'But I didn't hear it!' 'That's because you were talking!'

Dan: As people get older, do they tend to get quieter while watching things?

Rebecca: Mm-hmm. A bit more so.

Dan: If she continued to ask questions in five years or more, would that concern you?

Rebecca: Possibly. It would depend on if she were, like *The Lion King* [dir. Rob Minkoff and Roger Allers], just a million questions throughout the whole movie for *everything* we watch. If that happened, I'd wonder if she had some attention problem where she just

> can't focus on anything. But right now, I think it's more that she wants to be distracted because she doesn't want to focus.

In cases like Nick and Rebecca, cognitive maturation and civil attention were taken as naturally proceeding from one another. I do not wish to discount the fact that as they age, children *do* indeed usually change in their abilities to process or comprehend narrative information or sit still for longer periods of time. What I wish to highlight is how particular attention-signifying behaviors come to acquire value and necessarily mean that somebody is socially maturing.

In these contexts, activity often became linked with attentiveness, while "distraction" was associated with disruptions outside the screen. Rather than treating it as passive, parents were more likely to evaluate screen attention within family watching contexts through notions of good manners or active group involvement. Instead of a form of passivity to mitigate outright, sitting still and watching became a mannered behavior for which to aim (as one father put it, "I'll just sit and watch"). For Harold, the communal aspect of watching movies as a family turned the attentiveness into something more active than when he used the TV as a babysitter to "distract" his daughter in the mornings.

> **Dan:** Is it important to watch attentively as a family?
>
> **Harold:** Yeah, I think so. Because it kind of turns into, there's a difference in the mornings when we're getting ready to go to school and I just put her in front of the TV. That's just watching TV. But then the movie thing becomes a family activity, something that we do actively, and I think it's on the same line as going to the pool. It's an activity we knowingly do together to spend time together. It's not just staring at a screen.
>
> **Dan:** So when spending time together it's important to give attention?
>
> **Harold:** I think so, sure. Because that's the fun thing about watching a movie together: you laugh and get sad or scared together. But if you're on your phone and you miss something, then maybe she got the joke but you didn't.

Harold used this reasoning to justify minimizing his and his wife's phone use during family screenings (even as he admitted that the adults would still glance at other screens on occasion out

of habit). Part of the activeness of the watching situation depended on the ability of all family members to maintain some degree of proper attentiveness toward the TV. One parent with two kids (one ten years old, the other thirteen) claimed that the younger child's inability to watch attentively made her a "more passive" watcher than her older sister, who was much more likely to sit and focus. When I asked her to explain what she meant by "passive," she elaborated that since her younger daughter could "take it or leave it," she was not as involved in the viewing situation, and therefore not as active. Where activeness had previously connoted levels of non-screen activities to distance the child from programming, it now implied a mitigation of those activities to direct the child *toward* that programming.

A couple of parents discussed how they themselves felt a responsibility to model (or at least strive for) this outward attentive posture, even in situations where they did not personally enjoy the film or program being watched. Nancy, for instance, detailed how she tried to demonstrate attentiveness when her daughter selected the direct-to-video Disney sequel *Mulan II* [dir. Darrell Rooney and Lynne Southerland, 2004] for the family to watch. Though she said the film bored her, Nancy avoided peripheral activity because wanted to show her daughter the proper way to watch with others.

> **Dan:** If you're watching a movie with the kids that you don't like, what do you do?
>
> **Nancy:** [laughs] I have a really hard time sitting there and watching.
>
> **Dan:** Do you work on other things?
>
> **Nancy:** I try not to, because my mom always did, and we always wanted her to just come sit down with the family, and I'd swore that I'd never do that. I thought I'd be able to just sit down and watching something with my kids. But I struggle.
>
> **Dan:** Why is it important to sit and watch things together?
>
> **Nancy:** It's just polite. And I think it connotes family time, I guess in the sense of 'we're all in this together.'

Dan: And if you're doing other things while the screen is playing, that means that you're not together?

Nancy: Like out in the kitchen, where I can still see it. Like, if I were a knitter, that wouldn't be too bad. But if I'm out and up on my feet somewhere else…

Dan: Do you or your husband ever use your laptops while watching things?

Nancy: Together with the kids? No.

Dan: Is that deliberate?

Nancy: With my husband, yes. With me, I try.

Dan: Why would you not work on your laptop while watching *Mulan II*?

Nancy: I guess it shows lack of attention to them, like I'm checking out.

Dan: Why is it important to not show lack of attention?

Nancy: Again, this is family time. We're doing this together. I'm doing what they're doing. I want them to, teach them that when you're watching with someone, you should pay attention because it shows that you care about the other person.

Anecdotes like Nancy's emerge from logics of attention as interest discussed in Chapter 2, where respondents treated attention toward the screen as evidence of engagement with its contents. However, unlike the respondents of Chapter 2—many of whom reported deliberately distracting themselves from the screen as their interests waned—Nancy saw value in trying to perform "attentiveness" as its own right despite her own boredom toward the content. Rebecca was even more explicit on this point, saying that the family's outward attention to the screen was a form of respectfulness she hoped her younger daughter (age ten) learned to emulate.

Dan: Are there any movies you're not into that you watch with them?

Rebecca: A few weeks ago, they were watching some sort of manga, anime thing. It was in Japanese but had American subtitles. And I'm not interested in anime whatsoever, but they are, so we sat and watched it. I'm zoning in and out, thinking 'Oh, I got to do this later' while they're watching it.

Dan: Do you ever use your phone or do work on your laptop or anything?

Rebecca: No.

Dan: Why not?

Rebecca: Because we're in the dark and watching a movie.

Dan: Would you do that if you're watching things on your own?

Rebecca: I might check messages on my phone. If my husband is watching something I'm not into, I might get on my phone and start playing a game or something.

Dan: Why don't you do it movie night with the girls, then?

Rebecca: Because it's a family night watching a movie. Even if I don't particularly like it, that's what they're interested in so I'll try to give my attention to it.

Dan: So you think that watching movies as a family basically means that everyone needs to pretend to pay attention? [laughs]

Rebecca: Yeah! [laughs] You can at least pretend to care about what somebody else enjoys.

Rebecca: Does that also include if [your younger daughter] isn't getting into the movie? Would you prefer if she just sits quietly?

Rebecca: At least a little more quietly. Because if she doesn't care about the movie right now, she won't stop talking. It's like, pretend that you like the movie! Just pretend for an hour because you're not the only one in the room!

Dan: And does pretending to like a movie mean sitting quietly?

Rebecca: A little more, yeah.

For Rebecca, polite watching in the family context entailed a certain level of quiet attentiveness. As a result, she was frustrated when her daughter would begin to habitually talk or hop around during movies as the rest of the family was trying to watch them, since her daughter was not putting forward a display for attention appropriate for the situation. To correct her, Rebecca would routinely tell her, "be quieter, we're watching a movie" or "if you aren't going to watch, you can go to your room for a bit" when she began talking or playing around too often

(particularly when such behaviors were not related to the screen and appeared to indicate boredom or restlessness).

At the same time, Rebecca did not necessarily wish for her children to watch with *total* attention during these family viewing contexts. There was an acceptable (even *agreeable*) level of inattention permitted, even as the hope was that the kids would, on the whole, direct most of their focus to the screen with the rest of the family.

> **Dan:** Would you prefer that [your younger daughter] sit quietly the entire movie and not say anything?
>
> **Rebecca:** [pause] Maybe not the entire movie…
>
> **Dan:** Why not?
>
> **Rebecca:** Because if she has a question, I want her to be able to ask me. I want her to feel like it's okay if she doesn't understand what something means. But I don't want her to ask me every five minutes 'what's this mean?' They're explaining it in the movie! Or when she starts trying to talk to about what happened in school that day. 'We can talk about that later, but not right now.'

Rebecca notably did not wish for her daughter to be completely quiet, since she did see talking as signaling a level of mental engagement with the movie (while complete silence was too close to images of trancelike docility). This talk was mostly acceptable insofar as it synchronized or correlated with the narrative onscreen, however. Rebecca's concern appeared to be that once too many disruptions began to occur, they might start to accumulate or snowball: "if she gets derailed off the movie and wants to focus on talking to me, that's all she'll want to talk about and then she won't want to finish the movie," she explained. Other parents contended that their kids crossed a threshold from "properly attentive talk" to "improperly distracted talk" when their chatter started to annoy or impede the watching of other family members. For Harold, this line of acceptability could be crossed even when his daughter's talk *did* correlate with the text onscreen. For him, the issue was one of frequency: when his child began asking questions that felt too

redundant or close to one another, it became evident to him that she was asking questions for the sake of it rather than actually deepening her attention in the program.

> **Dan:** [In the viewing diary], she watched *Sesame Street* and *The Incredible Journey Home* [sic]. You said that she 'paid enough attention' and you engaged in conversation with her about the film or the show. She was asking questions and you were talking to her. I'm wondering how you evaluate this conversation in terms of her attention. Do you think this signals she's paying closer attention or that she's not paying attention?
>
> **Harold:** Oh, I think she's paying attention. Yeah. The questions she's asking most of the time are about the actual movie.
>
> **Dan:** So if she's asking questions about what's onscreen, that's a signal to you that she's engaging with it.
>
> **Harold:** Sure. [pause] In a way.
>
> **Dan:** In a way? What's your hesitation there?
>
> **Harold:** You know, at a point it just becomes redundant questions or she just seems to be wanting to make conversation.
>
> **Dan:** OK, so there's a point where she could be asking too many questions or questions that aren't relevant enough?
>
> **Harold:** Yeah. I'll just shush her and tell to watch.
>
> **Dan:** How do you know when you've crossed that line, where she's conversing in an appropriate way versus not?
>
> **Harold:** It's when the questions start to become ridiculous or meaningless and too close to each other. Like, she'll ask a question and I'll answer and she'll ask another one, another one, another one, and about meaningless things.
>
> **Dan:** Questions unrelated to the show?
>
> **Harold:** Not necessarily unrelated? How do I explain this?…You know, things like 'why is she wearing that dress?' or 'why is he wearing that hat?' kind of things. Questions that are just questions for questions' sake.
>
> **Dan:** So not related to what the characters are doing or how the plot is moving?
>
> **Harold:** Yeah, exactly. Just like, 'Why is there a lake there?' Things like that.

Talk, in other words, was permitted as attentive activity (and even encouraged in some

circumstances), but insofar as it also met certain expectations of relevancy or infrequency. In order for attention to be happening, some threshold of common screen fixation needed to be maintained. If this threshold was crossed, what was formerly attentive became a distracting or impulsive behavior to mitigate.

As this section illustrated, even as many parents tried to reduce their children's distraction *by* a screen, these discourses existed alongside other attempts to encourage their closer fixation *to* the screen. This could be explicitly couched in terms of distractedness—as in cases where parents used a film or TV show as a babysitting tool to temporarily separate their child from other events within the home. At other times, however, parents saw this in terms of attentiveness—like when they wished for their kids to watch something more closely as a display of their manners or belonging in the family during familial viewing contexts. Across these varying situations, the ways in which respondents read (and evaluated the desirability of) activeness or passiveness off the watching postures of their children were in constant flux. Sometimes, a silent, forward-facing screen orientation was desirable as a means of keeping the child passive for a time; other times, these marks of watching could be reconfigured as "active" or "engaged." The place of non- or extra-screenic behavior was similarly ambiguous here: it could be condemned as a mark of misbehavior, even as it could be encouraged or tolerated (at least if it did not go on for too long and some degree of silent attentiveness was eventually re-anchored to the screen). Even as parents held a deep-seated concern about the consequences of screen distraction, that did not necessarily eliminate the appeals of screen attention. The tendency to discuss attentiveness or distractedness in general terms often gave way to the needs of the context in which this attention was taking place.

Conclusion: Between the Active and the Passive

The chapter considered how contradictory idealizations of watching composure (one encouraging quiet attentiveness and the other discouraging it) interacted in the specific moments in which parents attempted to make sense of their children's watching behaviors. Navigating the boundary lines between attention and distraction relies on contradictory and ever-shifting notions of what it means to embody attentiveness or distractedness (both in oneself and in reading the displays of others). The more "attentive" one is to watching, the more active they may be said to be as a sign of their respectability or maturity. However, these same visible manners of watching also open people to perceptions of being "distracted" (passive) if they continue for too long or with too great an intensity. One might resist this sense of "distraction as fixation" by doing other things (chatting, moving, playing) around the screen as a way of reducing the screen's primacy within the room—and thereby reasserting one's autonomy from the screen as a form of "activeness." However, in doing this, one is also susceptible to accusations of being a "passive" viewer during contexts when attention to the screen is actually socially desired. As Sonia Livingstone summarizes, defining points of overlap and separation between these messy domains—the attentive, the distracted, the active, and the passive—is unclear.

> Is the person sitting quietly on the sofa watching television part of a respectable audience, paying careful attention and concentrating on understanding and benefiting from the entertainment offered, or are they passive couch potatoes, dependent on media for their pleasures, uncritical in their acceptance of messages, vulnerable to influence? And, if they do not sit quietly, are they active audiences participating in their social world or disruptive audiences, unable to concentrate? (2003, 349)

Part of this difficulty with evaluating the desirability of someone's watching comportment stems from a more general conflict within the meanings of screen attention themselves: is attention a *solution* for social problems (something demonstrating self-control and decorum) or is it *the problem* (a indication of the loss of self amongst surrounding influences) (Elsaesser 2009a, 10)?

From one moment to the next, attention is both the voluntary stretching and honing of one's faculties toward an object and the involuntary loss of one's faculties within that object (Gurton-Wachter 2016, 1).

For parents, many of whom are particularly self-reflexive about issues of mediating proper or improper behaviors, this ambiguity about attention/distraction can surface as a deep ambivalence about the role of film and television within home life (to say nothing about other emerging forms of digital media). The screen is at once harmless, useful, a point for social bonding, and a source of anxiety or bother—a glowing presence in the room to both orient the children toward and shield them against. As Ribak and Rosenthal (2015) discuss, people's relationships to certain media hardly ever resemble total acceptance or total avoidance, but rather interplays and combinations of uses and non-uses at particular moments (see also Plaut 2015). Parents did not mechanically adopt any single discourse on media attention for all cases; rather, they tended to sample from them inconsistently (and sometimes incoherently) to evaluate what desirable attention or distraction—and, correspondingly, activity and passivity—meant at particular moments in family life (Briggs 2006, 455; Hoover, Clark, and Alters 2004, 99). I heard fewer parents talk about wanting to strip away media from their children's routines altogether and more about how they wanted to negotiate the kinds of attentiveness they saw their kids exhibiting when they *did* inevitably watch at certain times. In other words, the challenge was how to ensure their children's attention did not become too distracted. Becoming "glued to the screen" was something to minimize, certainly, but it was also something for which regular exceptions and allowances could be granted—so long as they were "temporary."

These interpretations of children's watching postures and behaviors suggest a lingering uncertainty about the place of watching postures within everyday life. As discussed in previous

chapters, ambivalences about how precisely to watch the film or TV screen point toward recurring questions of how much the body must respond to life matters occurring *outside* of the screen. Critiques of excessive screen distraction within everyday life uneasily coexist with other mundane, though no less immediate necessities like occupying the kids for a few minutes to go make dinner or getting the little ones to stop poking at each other so that the family can watch a movie together. Discourses of parenting or screen effects were constantly open to exceptions, contingencies, or contradictions by virtue of their actualization within the realm of everyday life. So, too, were the very indicators of "attentiveness" and "distractedness" in flux. Despite a tendency to try to mark particular viewing postures as clear proof of attention, the definitional markers of attention/distraction were actually prone to constant shifts, depending on the interrelationships of a child's watching behaviors to family rituals, parenting styles, and other surrounding forces. Which behaviors were active or attentive in one moment could very easily become passive or distracted in the next.

Ultimately, if adults went back and forth in their judgments about the respective usefulness, desirability, or harmfulness of certain watching postures with their kids, it was likely because they had not ever fully resolved these questions themselves. As one parent summarized to me, screen attentiveness had "advantages and disadvantages, just like anything in life." What these pros or cons precisely meant in particular moments, however, was not always clear. Despite the investment of many parents in the creation or maintenance of particular forms of attention (including cultivating forms of watching that they themselves tried to practice in their own screen rituals), attention remained an irreconcilably ambiguous thing to try to detect, much less train. Slipping between readings of attention, distraction, activity, and passivity, the meanings of watching remained as uncertain as they were seemingly obvious. In the ambivalent

cultivation of watching postures within everyday home life, many parents seemed to hope for the possibility for their kids to be both watching and not-watching at the same time.

Conclusion

The Everyday Life of Media Attention

One of the great mysteries in the social life of attention lies in the concept's ability to seem so obvious in its daily sense while simultaneously being dispersed across many seemingly-contradictory logics. In the preceding four chapters, I have charted some of these logics as they have become attached to notions of watching and managing film and television at home. Throughout, I have focused on how audiences try to manage the boundary line between certain elements of screen experience—between control and disruption (Chapter 1), familiarity and disregard (Chapter 2), productivity and procrastination (Chapter 3), activity and passivity (Chapter 4). These draw further from other interrelated forces, including: divergent understandings of everyday life itself (as a domain of both predictability and uncontrollability), work/leisure boundaries, and taste hierarchies (designating certain technologies or content as deserving certain kinds of attention).

Although I have divided these logics into individual chapters and case studies for the sake of argument, I wish to conclude by considering what film and media studies may gain by acknowledging how these logics intersect and work in simultaneity with each other. To the extent that large-scale disciplinary lessons may be gleaned from a venture into the everyday, I believe that logics of attention suggest two directions for nuancing the continued work of critical film and media studies. In the first direction, I describe how logics of attention suggest ways of recognizing the thorny interrelationships between screen and non-screen practices (and the degrees to which people entangle or disentangle them from each other). Given the deep enmeshment of media forms with other, seemingly irrelevant activities and occurrences, one of the most pressing questions of film and media studies may be why film and television continue

to actually occupy any privileged sense within daily life (to the extent they do at all much of the time). In the second direction, I consider what a focus on lay knowledges can offer to an understanding of the politics of everyday media attention. If film and television continue to be talked about in loose and informal terms, it remains incumbent on cinema and media scholars to find strategies for taking seriously these forms of ordinary theorizing and sense-making. In offering these proposals, I wish to demonstrate how a deeper awareness of these sorts of lay knowledges can expand and contextualize certain kinds of rhetorical tendencies—certain routines of reasoning—that continue to surface in critical scholarship about audiences and media life.

The Screenic and the Non-Screenic

Take a hypothetical situation involving Jill, a twenty-year-old student who sits down on her sofa to rewatch *Casablanca* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942) on her laptop as a break from studying for finals. Jill identifies as a cinephile and considers *Casablanca* to be one of her favorite films, one that she has virtually committed to memory; if asked, she would describe it as an important film deserving and requiring at least some serious attention. She prepares and eats dinner prior to watching because she wants to avoid being too distracted by hunger. Several times during the movie, her mobile phone, sitting beside her on the arm of the couch, chimes with incoming, non-emergency texts from a friend. Jill checks the phone with each new text and responds. She pauses the film once as she types out a longer message, but lets the movie keep playing the other several times (maybe those scenes that she texts during are not ones she especially likes anyway; maybe she rationalizes that she is already so familiar with the movie that it's not a big deal to text during it; or maybe she does not really think that much about her actions at all). Jill might

begin to feel slightly guilty that she is watching a movie instead of studying more. This might just be an errant thought that her mind lingers on for a few moments, or maybe it will motivate her to pull out one of her textbooks to casually review some sections of a chapter while the movie continues playing. Maybe she will eventually put the textbook away because she is unable to satisfactorily focus on it with the movie playing nearby. What if we were to make Jill thirteen years old instead? Her mother wanders through the room and sees Jill watching *Casablanca* instead of studying (or while simultaneously looking up and down from a textbook). What if her mother spies Jill staring down at her phone while the film plays? What if, instead of *Casablanca,* Jill were to be watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007–) or Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), or maybe a televised political rally or campaign video? Across any of these cases—rich with variables of impulse, happenstance, familiarity, internalized guilt, and more—is Jill an "attentive" viewer? A "distracted" viewer? Both at once? If the lines between the attentive and the distracted cannot be consistently or categorically drawn, what is the analytical value of the scholar making such a distinction in describing these kinds of situations?

Indeed, considered all at once, these overlapping, floating logics of attention/distraction take on an appearance of incoherence the more holistically one attempts to examine them, at least as far as most formal analyses or diagnoses are concerned. And yet, they are usually still experienced and discussed in their immediacy as a relatively coherent, intuitive whole—a meaningful sense of obviousness. For this reason, I must disagree with film and media scholars who have critiqued any easy binary assumed between attention and distraction by arguing that the concepts do not hold any meaningful distinction. Toni Pape (2014, 67), for instance, draws from the work of German media theorist Petra Löffler (2013) to argue that attention is "distributed" and pulled among multiple objects simultaneously rather than hooked or

concentrated upon one specific object at a time. Pape contends that once we see attention in terms of distribution rather than of deficits, attention and distraction "cannot any longer be regarded as distinguishable mental states," and therefore the oppositions between them "collapse."

The oppositions between attention and distraction have not collapsed—at least not if you ask most audience members about it. Defining when one is attentive and when one is distracted continues to be something that people feel the need to do, enmeshed as such processes are with questions about the rules, boundaries, responsibilities, and excesses of defining oneself with media. In other words, retaining some intuitive sense of the attention/distraction binary is an outgrowth of the boundary work of being a "knowledgeable" or "conscientious" audience member in the twenty-first century. In their multiplicity, logics of attention offer a glimpse of the ongoing attempts of people to understand the allowances and limitations of their media life in relation to their overall life. The questions of the cinephile about how to minimize disruptions, of the binge-watcher about how long to continue watching, or of the parent about whether their child should be staring at the screen all have a similar basis in the ambiguity about how much of our perceptual, social, and temporal existence certain screen technologies should occupy. Within any screen routine, there is an ongoing work of demarcating what the allowances and limits of one's relationship toward the screen should be.

Film and television are significant parts of many people's routines, but they are far from the only ones—or even especially crucial ones much of the time. However any audience member understands their attentiveness or distractedness at a given moment, the basis of this understanding lies in how they see their media watching in relation to other objects, activities, impulses, and sensations occurring around and within them. As Sonia Livingstone (2002, 12) notes, people are never simply individuals sitting in front of screens; rather, they are people

whose screen proximity exists within other circles of influences. Looking at screen attention, in other words, involves looking at aspects of the quotidian that are traditionally regarded as non-screen-related—the stuff happening to the side that may seem completely irrelevant to whatever is happening onscreen. Processes of watching exist in a tension with things that seem to fall outside the immediate purview of watching itself, as people navigate how much of these "irrelevant" things they should incorporate or not incorporate into their watching at certain times. I have argued in this dissertation about the importance of considering these parts of the non-screenic (not-watching) within analyses of the screenic (watching). As Andrew Epstein (2016, 66) argues, the ways we assign value to these interplays reveal an ethical dimension to the conduct of everyday life: "it matters deeply which aspects of experience we notice and which we fail to register."

Even within much of the work on audiences, film and media scholarship has largely neglected to register many of the most taken-for-grated dimensions of everyday spectatorship. This may be an inevitable oversight given the focus on "film and media" within film and media disciplines. Here, the minimization of the non-screenic within screen studies functions similarly to the "media rituals" that Nick Couldry (2003, 2) describes around fan practices—actions that perpetuate and reinforce a sense that media are indeed a central force in our existence. When scholars unproblematically refer to cinephilia (or fandom or binge-watching) as a mode of intensified attention, or they theorize one-to-one associations between particular media technologies and particular types of attention, they are often naturalizing a myth that media are magnetically central in their appearances in everyday life. To be sure, media *are* very often significant factors in people's routines. However, I argue that taking this significance at face value risks smoothing over a host of more complicated processes, including: how audiences

codify and negotiate what is significant versus insignificant within their media experiences; how even significant media practices have layers of insignificance; how people often feel some anxiety about whether media are *too* significant to their routines or should be made *less* significant in some way; and so on. Coming to terms with the complexity of everyday film and TV requires acknowledging how media (even at their seemingly "most attentive") are very often forgotten about, hazily incorporated into other matters, or minimized (deliberately or not) for spans of time. Even when media-centered or media-adjacent, our experiences are not always media-centric (Livingstone 2002, 10).

One challenge of analyzing film and television in this way is recognizing some degree of artificiality to how academics demarcate what is important or unimportant when considering case studies of audiences (if they consider audiences in any concerted way at all). Film and media scholarship's work on spectatorship involves its own drawing of boundaries, often centering on the remarkable (literally, that-which-is-easier-to-remark-upon), while leaving out details in people's routines that may be considered trivial, passing, or too difficult to analyze in any productive way. It is, of course, impossible to incorporate or account for *everything* happening at any given moment of media spectatorship; if we see no natural boundaries to how we define processes of "watching," it is "easy to become lost in ever-widening circles of contextualization" (Livingstone 2002, 10; see also Seiter 1999, 9). I am not arguing for our analyses of film and television to somehow encompass a *totality* of all possible details around watching (which is surely impossible), nor am I advocating for simply assembling thicker, diary-like lists of things that people do as they watch (interesting or novel as those lists may be).

What I do urge is for more considerations of the multi-faceted dimensions contained within audience activities that are sometimes ignored when we define audiences in particular

ways. Evans, Coughlan, and Coughlan (2017, 199), for instance, note how viewing behaviors considered more passive, ephemeral, disconnected, apathetic, or forgettable are often left out of cultural studies work on fandom or active audiencehood. This is likely a result of the initial project of active audience studies in the 1980s and 1990s to distinguish audiencehood as an agential and politically rich site of study, contrary to schools of critical theory that took audiences for granted or caricaturized them as unwitting pawns. However, to better account for the processual work that goes into any sense of agency, it is important to consider how types of experiences often coded as "inactive" (fragmentary, impulsive, spontaneous) can exist simultaneously within what we often define as "active." As Chapter 2 argues, attention is often experienced as something bent and pulled among multiple poles at any given moment, and what we codify as "fandom" frequently has traces of "non-fandom" within it. The formation of conceptually useful concepts about audiences has, ironically enough, distracted us from asking many other potential questions about audiences, the boundary work they do, and the ways they try to incorporate (or not incorporate) screens into their lives.

For example, grappling with the boundary work of film and television attention points toward more nuanced ways of approaching questions about medium specificity that have motivated scholarly work for decades. As this dissertation has shown, attempts to hierarchize particular media based on their levels of attentiveness (for instance, cinema versus television) are quite common in everyday conversations. However, these hierarchies can be highly unstable, and perceptions of the experiential qualities of a particular medium may shift depending on the logics of attention someone views it through. To take one example, the kind of temporally-sustained concentration that may lead someone to define cinema as "hyper-attentive" in one instant may instead make watching movies feel more "distracted" a moment later: one's mind may begin to

wander despite (or perhaps because of) the perceived responsibility to pay close attention (explored in Chapters 1 and 2); a prolonged period of attentiveness may, paradoxically, result in the watcher trying to incorporate other tasks into their watching in order to reduce feelings of unproductiveness (explored in Chapter 3).

It is difficult to isolate any detail of reception as specific to a particular medium without considering how that detail interacts with other activities, tasks, or technologies that happen to be around that medium—each of which likely involve their *own* particular forms of boundary work about what is appropriate or inappropriate. For example, the recent proliferation of discourses on "media multitasking" often casts the film or TV screen as but one of several simultaneous windows or devices among which the audience spreads their focus (Hassoun 2014; McDonald and Meng 2009; Wilson 2016). Perhaps studies of medium specificity would be better served by interrogating what the historical, social, and cultural reasons may be for *why* certain groups of people feel the need to manage or perfect their film and TV attention at all, given how there are so many other parts of their lives that also involve some attentional allocation or management at the same time. Why, in other words, does (or should) "watching" *stand out* in its protocols for attention, to the extent that it does at all? What is it about a perceived (mis)management of film or TV watching that makes people mark these media as particularly "good objects" or "bad objects" whose associated conduct must be fine-tuned? Asking these sorts of questions may allow theorists to analyze why film or television watching may sometimes take a *privileged* place within everyday life, but without necessarily *essentializing* what the qualities of this watching entail.

The ability to see film and television in terms of their casual, embedded interrelationships with other goings-on is particularly important for accounting for the often broad ways that these

media are understood in everyday contexts. My participants were frequently able and willing to describe detailed differentiations in their attentional practices based on specific media forms. More often, however, it was the case that these various forms were simply lumped together informally within references to "the media" or "screens." Here, the most significant thing about their media watching was the extent to which it was drawing them away from other, "non-media" things. (As Chapter 4 demonstrates, for example, parents may express their anxieties about their children's viewing habits less in terms of specific media or content and more in terms of a generalized binary between "media" and "non-media" time.) Anna McCarthy (2001, 228) notes a gulf between the categories that scholars use to assign meaning to everyday life and the less articulable immediacy of actually living that life. I want to conclude this dissertation by reflecting on some potential benefits and challenges of using inconsistent lay knowledges to approach analyses of that immediacy.

Toward a Vernacular Media Studies

In the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology* (originally published in 1890, as discourses about the governance and cultivation of media attention were emerging in their now-recognizable forms), William James lays out what would become a widely-cited definition of psychological attention.

> Every one knows what attention is. It is the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called *distraction*, and *Zerstreutheit* in German. (1950, 403–404)

Many of James's specific concepts of attention and the mind have since been revised and critiqued by psychologists and social scientists (Pashler 1999; Rogers 2014). Nonetheless, in

common parlance, the explanatory appeal of the type of definition of attention James lays out has barely abated: the sense of attention as experientially intuitive, as a selective focus somehow connected to the individual, as the opposite of whatever that is "dazed" or "scatterbrained" (whatever that may mean in different contexts). As Harold Pashler (1999, 1) asserts, people often talk about attention in a quite familiar manner: "They speak of it as something whose existence is a brute fact of their daily experience and therefore something about which they know a great deal, with no debt to…researchers."

This study has attended to the tendency of audiences to often address their own media experiences in relatively confident and self-evident ways. As I note in the introduction, my study does not (indeed, cannot) encompass every potential way of making sense of attention across different groups of audiences. However, my case studies—as particular as they may be to the relatively young and educated populations I interviewed—nonetheless point to important absences in the way critical scholarship sometimes conceptualizes audiences and their practices. Specifically, they point to the challenge of categorizing and critiquing aspects of audience sense-making and boundary-setting that, on a formal level, often come across as quite piecemeal and inconsistent.

As I have shown throughout this study, people's modes of interacting with media do not always accord satisfyingly with the ways scholars try to describe them. This applies, on one level, to the very words that people draw on to describe their activities: terms like attention, distraction, media, genre, passivity, and so on frequently take on forms in their vernacular usage that are distinct from their more codified appearances within the academy (where they must engage with often decades-long debates about their precise meaning, applicability, or usefulness). More broadly, though, people—including, I suspect, most trained academics once they have stepped

away from their classrooms or writing tables—continue to hold beliefs about media in their daily lives that can be significantly out of step with contemporary academic orthodoxy. Whatever rigorous critiques or analyses of the terms that have been produced in recent decades (including, inevitably, this very dissertation), attention and distraction retain a recurring and persistent explanatory power across sectors of media life. Charles Acland (2011) has relatedly written about the "popular life" of ideas about subliminal messaging throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: although advertising professionals never took the concept very seriously and mass media researchers debunked the one study that purported to show its efficacy, many in the U.S. continue to draw on notions of subconscious influence as a convincing explainer for how "the media" work (indeed, two parents in my own study referenced the idea when talking about their fears of how their kids watch TV).

The popular life of attention/distraction as explored in this dissertation has uncovered multiple propositions about media that might be considered quite controversial, foolish, or outmoded if they were made in an academic argument: that being attentive is "60 percent" within the control of the individual; that movies and TV shows simply earn attention based on how good or bad they are; that multitasking or combining tasks while watching is a good way to remain productive; that watching is always (or almost always) passive; that physically moving in front of a screen helps shield someone from being influenced by it. These kinds of informal, off the cuff theorizations of media practice are manifest throughout daily life. I point this out *not* because lay knowledges are somehow more pure or truthful than academic discourses (a position that would risk reading as a type of political populism). Indeed, lay knowledges frequently draw from people's conversational familiarities with aspects of academic research, so the circles of influence between one and the other are probably much leakier than they may appear at first

glance. For example, my participants occasionally made reference to "studies" they had heard about topics like the inefficiency of multitasking or the effects of media on children, while their understandings of things like the mind had a debt to the way such concepts have historically emerged within fields such as neuroscience or psychology (Martin 2010; Thornton 2011).

The value of considering lay knowledges on their own terms (and *as* different from academic discourses in important ways) lies in what they can reveal about the messy collage of forces and impulses that help shape and guide people's media practices. These forces often suggest an irresolvable interplay between notions of intentionality and unintentionality in how people manage their selves with and amongst screens: lay knowledges occupy a meeting point between poles of (a) consciously behaving a particular way for particular reasons, (b) retroactively explaining one's impulses through reference to particular reasons, after the fact, and (c) not being able to explain why one acted in a particular way at all. For example, Chapter 2 examined how participants used concepts of boredom or disinterest to justify some cases where they decreased their attentions or incorporated additional activities into their watching. These justifications drew from a straightforward sense that particular movies or television programs can often be "just boring" and therefore fail to earn or sustain the viewer's consistent attention. Of course, as I discuss throughout that chapter, these evaluations of boredom or disinterest do not exist in a vacuum: participants often drew from their internalized knowledges of taste hierarchies and genre expectations when talking about what texts or scenes were less boring or more worthy of attentiveness than others. However, an analysis anchored entirely on these internalized discourses might not detect other important elements to the story—for example, that participants were sometimes bored by specific scenes in texts they otherwise enjoyed, that some found certain so-called quality texts boring even as they *wanted* to pay attention to them (or felt they

should), that people were not always sure exactly why something was boring them, and so on. These gradations were not terribly consistent and were often quite unpredictable, but they were still all broadly encompassed within the vernacular shorthand of claiming something was "just boring."

Ben Highmore (2011, 141) has argued for the value of these more loosely "subjective," "ineffable," or "sensorial" accounts within cultural studies and critical inquiry as alternatives (or supplements) to the work enabled by ideology critiques or discourse analyses. Looking at notions of taste and cultural capital within international food culture, Highmore notes that, although people's understandings of food cultures are inevitably entangled with neo-colonial formations (which any critical account must take seriously), people's in-the-moment interactions with those food cultures are "not reducible to this" (148). He writes, "Argument won't persuade the taste buds to enjoy or dislike unfamiliar foods: taste or distaste is not simply a matter of cultural capital, but of the body's orientation and disposition towards specific sensorial orchestrations" (142). This dissertation has shown how audiences frequently attempt to ignore, work around, or rationalize these relatively unruly sensorial and experiential fields toward the end of defining themselves as occupying certain viewing modes.

Critical studies of audiences—and of audience attention, in particular—have historically posited a fundamental unruliness or unpredictability about audiences as central to the political stakes of studying them. In one influential account, Ien Ang (1991, 92) argues that "actual audiences" are slippery constructs that will always resist the final "capture" of the analyst. Ang wrote specifically of the gulf between audiences' lived experiences and how they are measured and quantified by media industries: the more microscopically any industry attempts to understand the truth of what audiences do, the more any absolute understanding about them will

slip away.

> The fixing of meanings of 'television audience' is always by definition unfinished, because the world of actual audiences is too polysemic and polymorphic to be completely articulated in a closed discursive structure. There is thus always a 'surplus of meaning' which subverts the permanent stability and final closure of 'television audience' as a discursive construct. Indeed, if 'television audience' exists nowhere, actual audiences are everywhere. (14)

It is not uncommon for film and media scholars to write of attention/distraction in these same polymorphous terms, noting how "human attention resists…exact verification and quantification" (Napoli 2009, 166).

Critical historians of attention similarly suggest there is a general "excessiveness" in the concept of attention that leads to the consistent failure of attempts to govern it since the nineteenth century (Crary 1999, 47; Hagner 2003, 680). "Distraction," in particular, has been rhetorically employed by a diverse array of theorists in order to argue that audiences subvert or resist the control or conformity of the spectatorial roles assigned to them by particular industries or technologies. Here, distraction's connotations of "deformation, disintegration, and ceasing to be" are adopted as indicating a potential radicalism—a means of temporarily escaping or scrambling oppressive systems of capitalism (North 2012, 15). We can glimpse this tendency from Frankfurt School theorists' descriptions of cinematic distraction as a form of anti-rational and proto-revolutionary consciousness within industrial capitalism (Benediktsson 2010; Benjamin 1968; Kelley and Lord 1994; Kracauer 1995, 328), to more recent arguments about how the fluid practices of people online can elude digital systems of tracking, predicting, and controlling audience attention data (Beller 2006, 308; Bogard 2008, 419; Wise 2012, 170).[1]

[1] Much of the critical work on attention within digital environments has been built upon descriptions of post-industrial "attention economies" drawn from the fields of economics and management (Citton 2017, 5–6; Davenport and Beck 2001; Franck 1999; Goldhaber 1997). Drawing heavily from Gilles Deleuze's essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (1992), this body of work has argued that digital technologies aim to cultivate (and profit from) dispersed and fragmented states rather than stable or attentive ones (Bogard 2008; Bueno 2017, 164–166; Lee

My intentions are not to disregard the insights produced by much of this work. However, I do wish to point out how much of film and media studies' conceptions of audiences and everyday life has been built from some assumption about the "tactical nature of consumption"—a sense that audiences resist or subvert notions of order-making by virtue of how inconsistent and unpredictable their actual practices tend to be (Ang 1992, 142).[2] In this way, work on audiences has echoed a key argument of many scholars working within the loose subfield of everyday life studies—that the ordinary is resistant to codification, and that life-as-it-is-lived can never be fully reduced to our attempts to analyze it (De Certeau 1984; Rosaldo 1989; Seigworth 2000; Sheringham 2006, 363). As Michel Maffesoli (2004, 203) phrases it, it is quite difficult to make formal sense of the idiosyncrasies of "immediate life" in how they are so often "non-theorized, non-rationalized, with no finality nor aim, but entirely invested in the present."

While I agree that the immediacy of film and television life is impossible to fully rationalize or categorize, my final point is that we must still recognize that ordinary people *do* nevertheless rationalize and categorize it everyday. Moreover, they often do so in ways that do not feel like a "big deal" (or only vaguely do). A vernacularly-focused media studies allows us to recognize both the practical banality and the fundamental strangeness of how people tend to fashion stable-feeling knowledge bases out of a smorgasbord of experiences, beliefs, and discourses that often conflict with one another. Given the intangibility and variability of any one person's understandings of attention, it is striking how so many still see attentiveness and distractedness as domains of life to manage in some way. Within daily life, logics of attention allow for an ever-shifting series of norms by which audiences know and judge their conduct with,

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and Andrejevic 2014; Terranova 2012; Wise 2012; Zulli 2018).

[2] In an influential critique of early cultural studies work on consumption, Meghan Morris (1990) argued that critical scholars were perhaps overemphasizing notions of tactical subversion and resistance within audience practices. Morris cautioned that an overfocus on resistance not only produced banal repetitions of the same argument, but also ran the risk of unduly assigning extraordinary power to ordinary practices.

by, and near media technologies. These logics move between the sense that media help anchor everyday life *and* that they interrupt and destabilize that life (Nansen et al. 2010, 139), that media should be integrated within other activities *and* separated from them in important ways, that the media are anxiety-producing, charged objects we must perfect our conduct around *and* "un-self-consciously apolitical" things that happen to be around us (Silverstone 1994, 121). As one parent in my study, Nancy, expressed to me, "screen time" was always simultaneously a foreign presence and a completely normal one.

> **Dan:** Do you think that screens play a part within your children's normal attentional development? Or would it be ideal that they don't have any screens at all, in a perfect world?
>
> **Nancy:** Good question. I think one voice in my head does say that in a perfect world, they'd be able to go without any screen time. Our ancestors did. I do that too often where I'm like, 'well, one hundred years ago they also didn't do such and such. A hundred years ago they only had bread and milk for dinner!' So I hear that voice that in a perfect world, no, there wouldn't be any screen time and they'd be able to create their own play and I'd be able to manage it all and give them enough activities. You know, none of us would need that. That is a voice in my head, but I don't believe it. I just sometimes listen to it. Really, most of the time I just think, 'no, it's fine, it's normal.'

Accounting for Nancy's boundary work between wanting and not wanting screens has become a crucial part of analyzing the "experiential density" of ordinary life (Highmore 2011, 148). As long as so many people in the twenty-first century continue to treat film and television as "everyday" forms, there will be continued attempts to develop knowledges around what it means to watch or not-watch them at certain times and in certain ways. As scholars, it is incumbent on us to pay close attention to what these knowledges entail.

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Appendix A

Viewing Diary Form for Group 1 (Cinephiles)

IRB STUDY #1702194288
Group 1

Media Distraction Study
Take-Home Diary Instructions

Please read the following instructions carefully. Contact the researcher at iuattentionstudy1@gmail.com if you have any questions.

Basic Instructions

The following diary consists of 14 separate viewing reports. Your task is to observe and document your own regular movie-watching attention over the course of two weeks.

Complete one report for each film that you watch each day over two weeks (maximum of ONE film per day). If you watch more than one film in a day, please pick the one you think that best represents your regular viewing behavior. You only need to do a report on days you have watched a film. If you did not watch a film on a given day, you do not need to fill out a report. At the end of the two weeks, it is okay to still have several blank reports.

Type and save your responses into this form. Answer with as much detail as you can. To help with your memory, we encourage you to complete these questions within 3-4 hours after watching the movie, if possible.

Recording Responses

- Type your responses directly into the PDF report forms. Contact the researcher immediately if you have any problems with the forms.
- Please answer accurately and honestly. Do not worry about what the researcher may want to hear.
- You may choose not to answer particular questions for any reason, at no penalty to you.

Submission

Email your completed diary as an email attachment to iuattentionstudy1@gmail.com. The due date is listed in the email that Dan sent you with this form. Once your diary is received, Dan will contact you about scheduling a final interview. You will receive $30 for completing this assignment, and Dan will provide the payment at the interview.

If you decide to end your participation before the due date, please email us the reports you have completed.

If you have not watched any movies or completed any reports by the time your diary is due, please email the researcher and your due date will be extended.

Viewing Report Form

Please complete one of these reports for each day during the study period where you watched a film. If you watched more than one film during the day, select the one you feel best represents your regular viewing behavior. Type your responses into the form.

Date

What film did you watch today?

Where did you watch it?

If other, please specify:

(Note: If you indicated an "other" location, fill out the questions below that were most applicable to your situation.)

If you watched in a home setting, what device did you view the movie on?

If other, please specify:

Detail any steps you took to prepare to watch the film. Briefly explain why you took these steps.
(ex: preparing food, arranging furniture, closing windows, informing others of your plans, turning personal devices off or on)

Do you feel that you paid attention to the film? How do you know?

Did you encounter any distractions or disruptions while watching the film? (These can be both big or small disruptions.) Be specific.

Did you do anything to minimize or stop these distractions or disruptions? Explain.

Were any other people in the room or space with you as you watched the film?

If yes, who were these people?

Did these people watch the film with you?

Were these other people within your eyeshot?

Did these other viewers pay attention to the film? How do you know?

Were you ever frustrated by other people's lack of attention to the film? Why?

Are you satisfied with your overall attentiveness toward the film? Is there anything you would have changed, if you could have?

Appendix B

Viewing Diary Form for Group 2 (Binge-Watchers)

IRB STUDY #1702194288
Group 2

Media Distraction Study
Take-Home Diary Instructions

Please read the following instructions carefully. Contact the researcher at iuattentionstudy2@gmail.com if you have any questions.

Basic Instructions

The following diary consists of 14 separate viewing reports. Your task is to observe and document your own TV watching behavior over the course of two weeks.

Complete one report for each day over the two weeks that you watch a television program. If you watched more than one program on a particular day, please pick the one you think best represents your regular viewing behavior. You only need to do a report on days you have watched a television program. If you did not watch anything on a given day, you do not need to fill out a report. At the end of the two weeks, it is okay to still have several blank reports.

At least one of these reports should document a "binge-watch" session that you undertook. If you have not binge-watched anything by the time that your diary is due, please email the researcher at iuattentionstudy2@gmail.com and your due date will be extended.

Type and save your responses directly into this form. Answer with as much detail as you can. To help with your memory, we encourage you to complete these questions within 3-4 hours after watching the program, if possible.

Recording Responses

- Type your responses directly into the PDF report forms. Contact the researcher immediately if you have any problems with the forms.
- Please answer accurately and honestly. Do not worry about what the researcher may want to hear.
- You may choose not to answer particular questions for any reason, at no penalty to you.

Submission

Email your completed diary as an email attachment to iuattentionstudy2@gmail.com. The due date is listed in the email that Dan sent you with this form. Once your diary is received, Dan will contact you about scheduling a final interview. You will receive $30 for completing this assignment, and Dan will provide the payment at the interview.

If you decide to end your participation before the due date, please email us the reports you have completed.

Viewing Report Form

Please complete one of these reports for each day during the study period where you watched a TV program. If you watched more than one program during the day, select the one you feel best represents your regular viewing behavior. Type your responses into the form.

Note: At least one of these reports should document a binge-watch session. If you have not binge-watched anything by the due date, email the researcher at iuattentionstudy2@gmail.com.

Date

What TV program did you watch today?

Where did you watch it?

If other, please specify:

How did you watch the program?

If other, please specify:

Do you consider yourself a fan of this program? What is your level of commitment to watching it?

Do you feel that you paid attention to show as it played? (Including commercial breaks, if applicable.) Explain your answer.

How much time did you spend viewing the program? How many episodes did you watch?

Did you encounter any distractions or disruptions while watching the program? (These can be both big or small disruptions.) Be specific.

Did you do anything to minimize or stop these disruptions? Why or why not?

Would you describe your viewing today as "binging?" Why or why not?

If you did binge-watch today…

Did you make plans to binge the show? Please describe any preparations.

Was anyone else in the room as you binge-watched?

If yes, who were these people?

Did these people watch the show with you?

Did these other viewers pay attention to the show? How do you know?

Did you ever pause or stop the program during the binge-watch? Why or why not?

How did you feel at the end of the binge-watch?

Are you satisfied with your overall attentiveness toward the program? Is there anything you would have changed, if you could have?

Appendix C

Viewing Diary Form for Group 3 (Parents)

IRB STUDY #1702194288
Group 3

Media Distraction Study
Take-Home Diary Instructions

Please read the following instructions carefully. Contact the researcher at iuattentionstudy3@gmail.com if you have any questions.

Basic Instructions

The following diary consists of 14 separate viewing reports. Your task is to observe and document your child's TV watching behavior over the course of two weeks. Please concentrate only on your children who are age 5-7.

Complete one report for each day over the two weeks that your child watches a film or TV program. You only need to report on days when a film or TV program was watched. If your child did not watch anything on a given day, you do not need to fill out a report. At the end of the two weeks, it is okay to still have several blank reports.

Type and save your responses directly into this form. Answer with as much detail as you can. To help with your memory, we encourage you to complete these questions within 3-4 hours after your child engages with the media.

Recording Responses

- Type your responses directly into the PDF report forms. Contact the researcher immediately if you have any problems with the forms.
- Please answer accurately and honestly. Do not worry about what the researcher may want to hear.
- You may choose not to answer particular questions for any reason, at no penalty to you.

Submission

Email your completed diary as an email attachment to iuattentionstudy3@gmail.com. The due date is listed in the email that Dan sent you with this form. Once your diary is received, Dan will contact you about scheduling a final interview. You will receive $30 for completing this assignment, and Dan will provide the payment at the interview.

If you decide to end your participation before the due date, please email us the reports you have completed.

Viewing Report Form

Please complete one of these reports for each day during the study period where your child age 5-7 watched at least one film or TV program at home. Type your responses into the form.

Date

What movies and/or TV programs did your child watch at home today?

Approximately how long did your child spend watching TV or movies?

How did your child watch? (select all that apply)

Live TV broadcast
DVD or video
Other
Website or streaming service
Theater or public event

If other, please specify:

Did you have any rules or restrictions on your child's viewing or how long they viewed?

Did your child seek assistance or permission before watching? Did you help them set anything up? Explain.

Did you participate in watching this media with your child at any time? If yes, why? If no, did you ever monitor your child as s/he watched?

To your knowledge, did your child combine watching films or TV programs with use of any other media devices?

Are you satisfied with your child's overall attentiveness toward the movies or programs they watched? Select the most appropriate option below that describes your feelings:

My child paid too much attention

My child paid too little attention

My child paid just enough attention

I'm not sure how I feel

Briefly explain your response above

Is there anything you would have changed about your child's media viewing today, if you could have?

Dan Hassoun

curriculum vitae

Education

2019 **Ph.D, Communication and Culture** (emphasis: film & media studies)
Indiana University, Bloomington
Minor: Cultural Studies
Dissertation: *Logics of Attention: Watching and Not-Watching Film and Television in Everyday Life*
Committee: Barbara Klinger and Ilana Gershon (co-advisors), Joan Hawkins, Stephanie DeBoer, Ted Striphas (University of Colorado, Boulder)

2013 **M.A., Communication Studies** (emphasis: critical media studies)
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Minor: Moving Image Studies
Thesis: *Strategic Ambiguity in the Production and Reception of War Dramas*
Committee: Mary Vavrus (advisor), Mark Pedelty, Edward Schiappa

2010 **B.A., Studies in Cinema and Media Culture**
B.A., Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Minor: Communication Studies

Appointments

Indiana University, Bloomington

2017-2019 College of Arts & Sciences Fellow
2015-17 Associate Instructor, The Media School
2013-15 Associate Instructor, Dept. of Communication & Culture

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

2011-13 Graduate Teaching Assistant, Dept. of Communication Studies

Research/Teaching Interests

Critical media/communication studies; audiences and spectatorship; media and everyday life; qualitative audience studies; film and media history; consumer culture; media attention, distraction, and self-control; connected viewing and second screen technologies; new media and post-Fordist labor practices; governmentality

Publications

Refereed Journal Articles

Hassoun, Dan, and James N. Gilmore. (2017). "Drowsing: Toward a Concept of Sleepy Screen Engagement." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14 (2): 103–119.

Svensson, Alexander, and Dan Hassoun. (2016). "'Scream Into Your Phone': Second Screen Horror and Controlled Interactivity." *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 13 (1): 170–192.

Hassoun, Dan. (2016). "Engaging Distractions: Regulating Second-Screen Use in the Theater." *Cinema Journal* 55 (2): 89–111.
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Hassoun, Dan. (2015). "'All Over the Place': A Case Study of Classroom Multitasking and Attentional Performance." *New Media & Society* 17 (10): 1680–1695.

Hassoun, Dan. (2014). "Tracing Attentions: Toward an Analysis of Simultaneous Media Use." *Television & New Media* 15 (4): 271–288.

Hassoun, Dan. (2013). "Sequential Outliers: The Role of Spoilers in Comic Book Reading." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4 (2): 346–358.

Hassoun, Dan. (2012). "Costly Attentions: Governing the Media Multitasker." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 26 (4): 653–664.

Book Chapters

Hassoun, Dan. (2016). "A War for Everyone: Strategic Ambiguity in the Home-Front War Drama." In *A Companion to the War Film*, ed. Douglas Cunningham and John C. Nelson, 385–403. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hassoun, Dan. (2015). "Shifting Make-Ups: The Joker as Performance Style from Romero to Ledger." In *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, ed. Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner, 3–17. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Reviews

Hassoun, Dan. (2017). "Stuck in the Loop." Rev. of *Infinite Distraction: Paying Attention to Social Media*, by Dominic Pettman (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016). *Cultural Studies* 31 (5): 725–727.

Hassoun, Dan. (2015). Rev. of *Television and Postfeminist Housekeeping: No Time for Mother*, by Elizabeth Nathanson (London: Routledge, 2013). *Women's Studies in Communication* 38 (3): 351–353.

Hassoun, Dan. (2013). Rev. of *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman*, by Will Brooker (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012). *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46 (3): 672–675.

Hassoun, Dan. (2012). Rev. of *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media*, by Jason Farman (New York: Routledge, 2011). *International Journal of Communication* 6: 1166–1168.

Grants & Fellowships

2018-19	College of Arts & Sciences Dissertation Completion Fellowship, Indiana University [$25,000]
2018	Alexander M. Doty Memorial Fellowship, Indiana University [$500]
2017-18	College of Arts & Sciences Graduate Fellowship, Indiana University [$18,000]
2016-17	Rob Kling Social Informatics Fellowship, Indiana University [$5,000]
2016-17	Cultural Studies Program Travel Grant, Indiana University [$600]
2016-17	College of Arts & Sciences Travel Grant, Indiana University [$425]
2014	Graduate Travel Grant, Department of Communication & Culture, Indiana University [$300]
2014	College of Arts & Sciences Research Fund, Indiana University [$5,000]
2014	James O. Naremore Graduate Student Fund Grant, Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University [$250]
2012	Society for Cinema and Media Studies travel grant [$300]
2011-12	Graduate Travel Grant, Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota [$2,000]

Awards & Recognitions

2016	Teaching Excellence Award for MSCH-A315 (Advertising & Consumer Culture), Department of Communication & Culture, Indiana University
2016	Brantlinger-Naremore Essay Prize for Best Graduate Student Writing in Cultural Studies, Cultural Studies Program, Indiana University. Awarded for the paper "Liberated, Absorbed, Scattered, Bored: Arguing 'Distraction' Across Media Studies"

2012 Graduate Student Scholar Award in recognition of outstanding graduate achievements, Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota

2012 Top Paper Award, awarded by the Midwest Popular Culture Association for the paper "Flattering Conflicts: Strategic Ambiguity and War Film Reception"

2010 Best Undergraduate Paper Award, awarded by the Midwest Popular Culture Association for the paper "All Men and No Men: Reading Excess in *Caligula*"

2007-10 Dean's List, College of Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota (six consecutive semesters)

Conferences & Presentations

Panels Organized

(March 2017). "Media, Attention, and Techniques of Governance." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL.

(March 2016). "Banality in/and the Everyday Media Landscape." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Atlanta, GA. (co-organized with James N. Gilmore)

Papers Presented

(March 2019). "'Watching, But Not Too Much': Managing the Attention and Distraction Boundary in Binge-Watching Practices." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Seattle, WA.

(October 2017). "Attentional Work: Managing the Instability of Everyday Film Viewing." Indiana University Cultural Studies Conference, Bloomington, IN.

(March 2017). "Patrolling the Aisles: Police, Theater Security, and the Maintenance of Attentional Conduct." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL.

(March 2016). "Slow Media: Everyday Deceleration and Routines of Restfulness." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Atlanta, GA. (co-presented with James N. Gilmore)

(November 2015). "Distracted Coordinations: Driving, Mobile Phones, and the Everyday's Creative (Self-)Destruction." National Communication Association Conference, Las Vegas, NV.

(October 2015). "Watching the Watchers: Policing Ordinary Film Exhibition." Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, Cincinnati, OH.

(November 2014). "Optimizing the Poor Juggler: Multitasking and the (In)Efficient Computerization of the Mind." National Communication Association Conference, Chicago, IL.

(October 2014). "Butt-Numbing Blockbusters: Film Running Times as Historical Problematic." Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, Indianapolis, IN.

(October 2013). "Situating That Annoying, Glowing Screen: Theater Texting and Histories of Audience Distraction." Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, St. Louis, MO.

(April 2013). "Strategic Ambiguity in the Production of War Cinema." Doing Rhetoric at the U Symposium, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

(March 2013). "The Threat of Inattention: Media Multitasking and the Active Audience." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL.

(October 2012). "Flattering Conflicts: Strategic Ambiguity and War Film Reception." Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, Columbus, OH. **[Top paper award]**

(June 2012). "Pleasurable Page Scans: The Role of Spoilers in Comic Book Reading." Rocky Mountain Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, Denver, CO.

(March 2012). "Remembering Travolta's Dreadlocks: 'Bad' Cinema as Imagined Community." Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Boston, MA.

(October 2011). "'Stay on the Straight and Narrow, Kids': Understanding Wandering Attentions in Film and Comic Narration." The Comic Book Rises: From Underdogs to Blockbusters Symposium, Bloomington, IN.

(October 2011). "God Was (Rightly?) Wrong: *Bigger Than Life* and Hollywood's Interpretive Flexibility." Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, Milwaukee, WI.

(October 2010). "All Men and No Men: Reading Excess in *Caligula* (1979)." Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, Minneapolis, MN. **[Top paper award]**

(October 2009). "The Inversion of Power Roles and Dynamics in Superior-Subordinate Relationships." Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference, Detroit, MI. (co-presented with Greg Carlson).

Panel Discussant

(November 2012). "Television Ratings and Audience Measurement in the Digital Age." Flow Conference, Austin, TX.

Campus, Departmental, and Public Talks

(2014-2018). Public introductions for Indiana University Cinema, City Lights Film Series (films introduced: *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg, Mad Love, The Incredible Shrinking Man, Duck Soup, 7th Heaven, Wild Strawberries, City Lights, A Face in the Crowd*)

(November 2015). "Distracted Coordinations: Driving, Mobile Phones, and the Everyday's Creative (Self-)Destruction." Department of Communication & Culture Colloquium Series, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

(February 2013). "Media Multitasking and the Active Audience." Wednesday Noon Research Colloquium, Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

Research Experience

2017	Principal investigator, qualitative audience study on film and television viewers' perceptions and practices about distraction and attention [Involved 84 recorded interviews and take-home diaries]
2016-17	Research assistant to Prof. Ilana Gershon and Prof. Amy Gonzales on project about digital instability and strategies of job-seeking without reliable Internet access
2014-15	Research assistant to Prof. Ilana Gershon on project about new media technologies and cultures of job-seeking, hiring, and recruiting in Silicon Valley tech industries. [Published as book *Down and Out in the New Economy* (University of Chicago Press, 2017)]
2012-13	Principal investigator, qualitative audience study on viewers' interpretations of political content in Hollywood Iraq War films [Involved designing and coding 100 written surveys]
2012	Principal investigator, ethnographic project on undergraduate students' media multitasking in a large lecture hall. [Involved 1 semester of interviewing students and covert participant observation during class time]

Teaching Experience

Courses Led/Designed

Indiana University, Bloomington

2017 Media in the Global Context (200-level)
Introduces students to the political, industrial, and cultural issues underpinning the globalization of cinema and media. Drawing on examples from film, television, and new media, students explore issues relating to global genres, representation, production, distribution, and reception, as well as transnational media infrastructure, media in local and global political movements, and environmental impacts of media systems.

2015/16 Advertising & Consumer Culture (300-level)
Examines the cultural history of advertising and consumer culture from the 19th century to the present, with a focus on critical debates about the impacts of consumerism on self, politics, and society. Weeks dedicated to discussions of mass culture, narrowcasting, political branding, self-branding, ethical consumption, and global labor and environmental issues.

2014/15 Intro to Media (100-level)
Introduces students to foundational concepts in the history and critical study of film, television, and new digital technologies, focusing on questions of aesthetics, genre, representation, institutions/ownership, and audiences. Focus paid to introductory formal audiovisual analysis; representations of class, race, gender, and sexuality over film and television history; and the shift from mass culture to digital personalization.

2013/14 Public Oral Communication (100-level)
Introduces students to basics in oral public presentation, including: researching, outlining, delivering, and adapting speeches to different audiences; constructing logical arguments with use of relevant evidence; and understanding the ethical responsibilities in sending and receiving oral messages.

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

2012/13 Intro to Electronic Media Production (300-level)
Explores the fundamentals of writing and producing for live-on-tape television and video production. Class combines classroom instruction on visual storytelling strategies, in-studio training with production equipment, and group projects teaching students basic production preparation and procedures.

2011/12 Intro to Public Speaking (100-level)
Introduces students to basic skills in ethical and effective public speaking, including the researching, organizing, and delivery of speeches (informative, persuasive, and ceremonial speeches).

Courses Assisted

Indiana University, Bloomington

2016 Hollywood I (200-level) – instructor: Dr. Gregory Waller
Survey course on the first fifty years of U.S. cinema, from the silent era to World War II and the development of Hollywood as a business enterprise and cultural institution. Particular focus paid to the star system and the ways race, gender, and class structure Hollywood narratives.

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

2013 Intro to Communication Theory (300-level) – instructor: Dr. Dean Hewes
Survey course on foundational social scientific theories of human communication.

2011 Intro to U.S. Electronic Media (300-level) – instructor: Dr. Peter Gregg
Survey course on the history of radio, film, television, and the Internet, with focus on issues relating to industry conglomeration and the relationship between media industries and audiences.

Directed Readings

2016 "Critically Analyzing Advertising in Local Bloomington Bars." Directed reading with Ryan Opal, Indiana University

Other Teaching Experience

2009 Teaching assistant in Video Production I, Trollwood Performing Arts School for grades 7-12, Fargo, ND
Summer program introducing teenagers to basics in screenwriting, single-camera video production, and editing

Service & Community Involvement

Service to the Discipline

2015-2017 Conference paper reviewer, National Communication Association
Divisions: Critical and Cultural Studies, Visual Communication

Peer Reviewer: *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (2019), 1 manuscript
New Media & Society (2018, 2015), 2 manuscripts
Western Journal of Communication (2017), 1 manuscript
Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies (2016), 1 manuscript
Convergence (2014), 1 manuscript

Institutional Service

2014-2018 Co-programmer, City Lights Film Series, Indiana University Cinema

2014	Grant reviewer, Indiana University Graduate and Professional Student Organization
2014-15	Workshop director, In Light Human Rights Film Festival, Indiana University
2012-13	Treasurer, Communication Studies Graduate Student Association, University of MN

Other Community & Work Experience

2016-present	Crisis Intervention Specialist, Middle Way House domestic violence shelter, Bloomington, IN Maintaining security and providing afterhours staff assistance for residents in a transitional housing facility for low-income survivors of domestic violence
2017-18	Screening selection committee, Bloomington Pride Film Festival
2010-11	Violence Prevention Educator, Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education, Minneapolis, MN Facilitated presentations and discussions across the University of Minnesota and neighboring communities about sexual assault, relationship violence, and gender representations in popular culture
2009-10	President, Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature Student Association, University of Minnesota
2009-10	Office assistant, Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival
2008-10	Volunteer, Minnesota Film Arts, Minneapolis, MN
2006-09	Projectionist, Century 10 Cinema, Fargo, ND (trained at 35mm platter projection)

Affiliations

Midwest Popular Culture Association
National Communication Association
Society for Cinema and Media Studies